Winter 1988

The sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics

Thomas G. McGowan
University of New Hampshire, Durham

Order Number 8907446

The sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics

McGowan, Thomas G., Ph.D.

University of New Hampshire, 1988

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

BY

Thomas G. McGowan
BA, Hunter College, CUNY, 1983
MSSR, Hunter College, CUNY, 1985

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

December, 1988

This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Dissertation director, Walter Buckley
Professor of Sociology

Peter Dodge, Associate Professor
and Chairperson of Sociology

Kirk R. Williams
Associate Professor of Sociology

R. Valentine Dusek
Associate Professor of Philosophy

Robert C. Scharff
Associate Professor of Philosophy

November 23, 1988
Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work, and the effort it embodies, to my wife Lisa, and to our daughters Addie and Hannah.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible had it not been for the support of my wife Lisa, who maintained our home and guided and protected our children during my long periods of absence.

I would also like to thank my committee members, who provided me with much needed advice and direction. Special thanks to Walter Buckley, who encouraged my interest in a somewhat obscure tradition and supported my effort even when our positions diverged. I would also like to thank Peter Dodge, who instilled in me confidence during periods of self-doubt.

Special thanks also to Deena Peschke, whose unbearable wit made the long hours in Horton bearable; and to Angele Cook, whose genuine concern over my fate as a graduate student inspired me to move and move quickly.

Special thanks also to John Byrne, who spent Thanksgiving Day helping me produce an acceptable final draft of this work. Special thanks also to Dan Santoro, who arranged for the final copies of this work to be printed. (Congrats to you, too, Dan!)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

by

Thomas G. McGowan
University of New Hampshire, December, 1988

This study is a social-theoretical analysis of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Special attention is paid to Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation, which is based in part on Martin Heidegger's concept of the fore-structure of understanding. This Heideggerian concept, which implies that interpretation cannot proceed without a prior understanding of its object, reappears in Gadamer's work in his notion of the prejudiced condition of interpretation. According to Gadamer, interpretation is prejudiced because it involves the application of preconscious linguistical concepts the truth status of which is assumed during their moment of application. Gadamer rejects a strictly pejorative view of prejudices, however, viewing them as necessary preliminary judgments of meaning that may be true or false. For Gadamer, the task we face is to experience prejudices consciously by bringing into discourse their tacit semantical content. This process is defined by Gadamer as the experience of hermeneutical reflection. Hermeneutical

reflection yields an "effective-historical consciousness," a consciousness that is aware of the anterior and meaning-constitutive effect of one's existence within a linguistic tradition. The interpretive-sociological contributions of Max Weber, Alfred Schutz and G. H. Mead are also discussed and contrasted with Gadamer's analysis of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. The social-theoretical reception of Gadamer is also discussed. It is argued that Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas misunderstand Gadamer's claim regarding the universality of hermeneutics and consequently fail to grasp the full significance of his hermeneutics for sociology. In the case of Giddens, the implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics are limited to the theoretical realm; in Habermas, the implications are taken to be strictly methodological. It is argued that the sociological significance of Gadamer is topical, as well as theoretical and methodological. By "topical" we mean that Gadamer's hermeneutics may be used to introduce new topics and questions for research within sociology. It is proposed that sociologists begin studying the distribution of prejudices across groups and the stratification and differentiation of situational opportunities conducive to hermeneutical reflection.

CHAPTER I

NATURE, SCOPE AND PURPOSE

> It may be noted, to paraphrase Whitehead, that sociological theory has for some time been living off the intellectual capital of previous centuries.

So began Walter Buckley's Sociology and Modern Systems Theory. The main thrust of the work was its critique of "functional" or "consensus" social theories rooted in "organismic system models laid down during previous centuries."[1] This critique was based on the argument that such approaches are incapable of accounting for the inherently processual nature of human behavior and social organization. Central to the thesis was the notion that the socio-cultural system should be conceptualized as a complex adaptive system based on the organization of information and meaning.[2] While the project at hand differs substantially from Buckley's of twenty years ago, the two share some striking structural similarities the illumination of which

---

[1] Walter Buckley, Sociology and Modern Systems Theory (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), p. 1.

[2] Drawing from a diverse body of literature from this century, Buckley argued for a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of social systems. Instead of conceptualizing social systems in terms of reified analogies between biological organisms and social structure, Buckley conceptualized social systems in terms of the relationship between the organization of information and social action, both at the micro and macro levels.

will serve to put the present discussion in context.

Buckley faced the task of articulating the potential sociological importance of theoretical concepts that were alien to sociology. While the general systems approach of such thinkers as von Bertalanffy and Rapoport had already touched numerous fields, their works had yet to be explored by sociologists. Despite "recent signs of such stirrings," wrote Buckley, "hardly any of the intellectual ferment it (general systems research) has occasioned has penetrated sociology."[3] Buckley's goal, therefore, was to introduce sociologists to the key principles and insights of general systems theory and research. Similarly, the present work faces the task of demonstrating the potential sociological importance of a body of literature unfamiliar to most sociologists. The hermeneutical[4] insights of Hans-Georg Gadamer, while enjoying relatively wide currency in such fields as philosophy and literary criticism, have yet to be mined for their full sociological importance.[5]

The task of articulating the potential sociological importance of theoretical insights alien to sociology is a

---

[3] Buckley, Sociology and Modern Systems Theory, 1967, p. vii.

[4] Hermeneutics is defined in this study as the study of interpretation.

[5] Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas are the only social theorists that I know of to have discussed Gadamer's work in relation to sociology. Their respective analyses of Gadamer are discussed in detail in chapter five.

difficult one. First, one must contend with what might be termed "paradigmatic territorialism," the tendency for established authorities in a disciplinary matrix to ignore or discredit fresh insights that might threaten the comfortable status they have come to attain. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, one must be sensitive to the language differences which often separate the alien literature from the sociological. In the case of Buckley's project, it was quite clear that the vocabulary of systems theory constituted a very different "language game" than that with which most sociologists were accustomed.[6]

---

[6] It should be noted that the difficulties faced by Buckley went beyond paradigmatic territorialism and misinterpretation. By attacking the theoretical center of American sociology, Parsonian functionalism, Buckley was at the same time attacking the conservative political nature of mainstream American sociology. Sociology and Modern Systems Theory therefore attacked traditional American sociology on two fronts: the theoretical and the political. The extent to which the latter factor contributed to what George Ritzer describes as systems theory's "meteoric rise and fall" within sociology is an open question (see George Ritzer Sociological Theory (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 397-401. However, Ritzer does not offer any explanation as to why the initial excitement surrounding Sociology and Modern Systems Theory gave way to indifference in a relatively short period of time. One thing is clear, however: some critics mistakenly interpreted Buckley's project as being "conservative" in nature. As a result, Buckley came under fire from the "left" as well as from the "right." As Ritzer points out, the dialectical nature of Buckley's systems theory is similar to Marxist theories of social change and conflict theory in general. That some commentators mistook Buckley's project for being conservative in nature most probably resulted from systems theory's resemblence to cybernetics or control theory. Although Buckley did distinguish social systems theory from cybernetics it is arguable that he did not emphasize strongly enough the open-endedness of human interpretation and social action vis-a-vis technological control systems.

An American sociologist exploring the significance of hermeneutics faces similar problems. First, there is the paradigmatic barrier, and the opposition which is to be expected simply because one is exploring unfamiliar theoretical landscapes. But here the plot thickens. Compared to the interpretive problems experienced by Buckley, those anticipated with regard to this project are much more deeply rooted. Hermeneutics, first of all, is a philosophical tradition. While some sociologists recognize the importance of philosophy for the practice of sociology, many do not. Generally speaking, then, it is not surprising that hermeneutics is unfamiliar to most sociologists. What is perhaps more important, however, is that hermeneutics is grounded in European, primarily German, philosophy. This means that hermeneutics is both paradigmatically and culturally foreign to American sociology.

As Thompson points out, there is a "longstanding insularity with regard to Continental traditions of thought in the English-speaking world."[7] This "insularity" has undoubtedly contributed to the general failure of American sociologists to take into account that which is of value in the hermeneutic literature. It would be incorrect, however, to explain the ambiguity and misunderstanding regarding

---

[7] John P. Thompson, "Introduction," in his translation of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1981), p. 1.

hermeneutics exclusively in terms of American provincialism.[8] As Giddens argues, American and Anglo-Saxon sociology has been dominated by views which draw their inspiration from "positivistic or naturalistic philosophies of natural science."[9] Such views of science, which reduce meaning to observable "facts," are antithetical to hermeneutics, which takes the interpretation of meaning to be its primary goal. It is clear, then, that there are at least two reasons why the hermeneutic tradition has generally been either ignored or misunderstood within American sociology: 1) American sociology's general detachment from European philosophy, and 2) the dominance of positivism within American sociology.[10]

---

[8] The provincialism of which I speak is perhaps most evident in the general failure of the American education system to successfully teach students foreign languages. While it is mandatory for many students to **study** foreign languages, it is not mandatory that they actually **learn** a foreign language, in any practical sense of the term.

[9] Anthony Giddens, Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 1. Giddens defines positivism broadly in terms of logic and method. According to Giddens, social scientists following the logic of Carnap, Hempel and Nagel; and the methodology of Comte and Durkheim, would be considered "positivists."

[10] It is fairly clear that one of the factors contributing to American sociology's detachment from European philosophy is the language barrier mentioned above. It should be noted that a non-German-speaking American would not have been able to study the sociological significance of hermeneutics until very recently. (For example, Heidegger's Being and Time was only made available in English in 1962; Gadamer's Truth and Method, in 1975.) Fortunately, there now exists a considerable body of translated materials, and this has made possible an exclusively American study of hermeneutics.

Where it has been ignored, the meaning of hermeneutics simply appears ambiguous within sociology. Where it has been misunderstood, however, hermeneutics has come to carry with it strictly negative connotations. The closest sociology has come to direct contact with hermeneutics is found in the work of Max Weber, in particular, in his conception of Verstehen as an interpretive-sociological method. As we shall see in chapter six, however, two of the most influential English translations of Weber's work seem to have misconstrued several of his key concepts, including his conception of Verstehen. These translations are largely responsible for the fact that in the minds of many American sociologists Verstehen, and by association hermeneutics, is likely to represent a pre-scientific method based on empathetic introspection. When combined with the positivist bias in American sociology against humanistic or "soft" social science, the result has been a view of hermeneutics which is largely pejorative. To put it mildly, such misunderstanding regarding the nature and scope of hermeneutics has served to deter its sociological study.[11]

Another structural similarity between this work and

---

[11] In addition to my review of the literature, these observations regarding the ambiguity and misunderstanding regarding the nature and scope of hermeneutics within sociology has been further supported by personal experience, such as conversations which I have had with graduate students and professors over the past two years, both at the UNH and at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association and the Society for the Study of Social Problems in Chicago, New York, and Washington.

Buckley's concerns the scope of its discussion. Buckley's project was not "an attempt at a definitive review of current systems theory in all its sprawling ramifications, but rather a selective emphasis on contributions of potential significance to the sociological perspective."[12] Similarly, this study is not an attempt at a definitive review of hermeneutics. It is, instead, a very selective analysis of the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. This study is selective in another sense. It will not involve philosophical commentary on the larger issues and questions related to the concepts under consideration, nor will it attempt to consider developments in the field of cognitive psychology which might be relevant to Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation. Such concerns, while relevant, simply lie beyond the scope of this study. We will, however 1) discuss the critical social-theoretical reception of Gadamer (chapter five) and 2) compare his hermeneutics to various theories within interpretive sociology (chapter six).

These introductory remarks are intended to make explicit the problems which must be taken into account before proceeding with our discussion. Specifically, the discussion must be sensitive to the fact that its reception will be conditioned by the structural factors mentioned

---

[12] Buckley, Sociology and Modern Systems Theory, 1967, p. 2.

above. Perhaps the most important of these factors is the language difference which separates hermeneutics from sociology. We are not referring here to the difference between English and German, although this difference of course complicates and limits the study of hermeneutics within American sociology. We are, instead, referring to the terminological differences between sociology and hermeneutics. Heidegger's writing, for example, would no doubt appear obscure and impenetrable to most sociologists if presented in its original (albeit translated) form, for many of his concepts are philosophical in nature and draw from intellectual traditions foreign to sociology. In light of this, an effort will be made to demystify and clarify the more philosophical and abstract concepts by re-expressing them in terms familiar to sociologists whenever possible.

The purpose of this study is to establish the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for sociology. Our discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutics focuses primarily on his analysis of the nature of understanding and interpretation.[13] As we shall see, his work is significant

[13] It should be noted at this point that both Heidegger and Gadamer define understanding ontologically as our way of being: we understand simply by virtue of the fact that we are human beings existing in a meaningful world. Interpretation is what understanding becomes at any particular moment; it is the way understanding happens. We may say that understanding is our ability to relate to the world in a meaningful way, while interpretation is the manifestation of this ability in particular situations.

for sociology on three levels, the 1) theoretical, 2) methodological, and 3) topical.

On a theoretical level, Gadamer's hermeneutics provides us with an opportunity to inform and refine existent social theory by specifying the experience of interpretation and its relationship to the social construction of reality. As we shall see, Gadamer's insights into the nature of interpretation are particularly important for the question of the relationship between individual and social structure. In addition, Gadamer's hermeneutics clears the way for the development of a theory of interpretive violence. Such a theory, the basic points of which are outlined in chapter seven, attempts to locate the roots of social and economic domination at the interpretive level, a level arguably more primary than that studied by Marxist and critical theory.

On the methodological level, Gadamer's hermeneutics shows us what interpretation always involves. It also shows us that methodologically guided or "thematized" interpretation errs if it assumes that it is possible to separate the researcher from his or her linguistic tradition. While this contention of Gadamer's is responsible for much of the attention which he has received in philosophical circles, it is not the aspect of his work with which we are primarily concerned.

It is the view of this study that the central significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics lies at the topical

level. We mean by this that Gadamer's work enables us to bring into sociological discourse research topics and questions that are both interesting and important. In the course of our discussion we will identify two such topics and demonstrate why they are deserving of sociological study. In chapter seven we will specify how sociologists might begin to study these topics empirically. The fourfold purpose of this work, therefore, is to 1) introduce sociologists to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, 2) discuss two research topics which he has identified, 3) demonstrate why these topics should be studied sociologically, and 4) specify how we might begin to study these topics empirically.[14]

[14] The two research topics alluded to are 1) the study of the prejudiced nature of interpretation and 2) the experience of hermeneutical reflection whereby we consciously experience the meaning of linguistical concepts which are typically assumed or taken for granted.

What Is Hermeneutics?

The term "hermeneutics" is derived from the Greek verb hermeneuein, which essentially means, to interpret.[15] Those versed in Greek mythology may remember that Hermes was the messenger of the gods. It is often said, however, that while delivering a message may be straightforward enough, interpreting its meaning is something quite different. Hermeneutics has traditionally concerned itself with the problems which hinder interpretation. Bleicher defines hermeneutics generally as "the theory of the interpretation of meaning."[16] For our purposes, we will define hermeneutics generally as the study of interpretation.

The first hermeneuticists, or hermeneuticians, as they are also called,[17] were concerned with questions regarding the authenticity of sacred texts. Thus early on hermeneutics, as a sub-field of theology, took the form of a methodology. It is important to note that traditional hermeneutics, initially serving theology and eventually

---

[15] Hendrik Birus, "Hermeneutics today: Some skeptical remarks." New German Critique, No. 42, 1981, p. 73. This short paper provides a brief discussion of the etymology of the term.

[16] Josef Bleicher, Contemporary Hermeneutics (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 268.

[17] Robert Perinbanayagm uses the term "hermeneutician" in his work Signifying Acts (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 1. Hendrik Birus, on the other hand, uses the term "hermeneuticist," in his paper "Hermeneutics today," 1981.

jurisprudence and philology, viewed interpretation in a strictly methodological sense.[18] During the nineteenth century, largely due to the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher, hermeneutics came to be applied to problems regarding the interpretation of history in general and was thereby expanded into a general discipline. In the late nineteenth century Wilhelm Dilthey attempted to use hermeneutics to lay the ground for a methodology of the human sciences, thus bringing traditional hermeneutics into contact with psychology and sociology. In the twentieth century, as a result of the philosophical application of hermeneutics by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the scope of hermeneutics has been widened even further. It is Gadamer's claim that the scope of hermeneutics is universal, that is, relevant to all fields of study as well as to the study of interpretation itself. While this claim is disputed by certain thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas, and must be closely examined, it is beyond dispute that the study of interpretation is no longer bound to the disciplines within which it has traditionally been applied.

Philosophical hermeneutics refers specifically to the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and by association, to

---

[18] For descriptions of the historical development of hermeneutics see Zygmunt Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed., Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, The Hermeneutics Reader (New York: Continuum, 1988).

Martin Heidegger. Their work marks a radical departure from traditional hermeneutics and its methodological view of interpretation. Within philosophical hermeneutics interpretation is viewed as something we all do naturally simply as a result of our existence within a linguistic and historical world: we are interpretive beings. According to philosophical hermeneutics, while we may thematize or methodologize interpretation it is a mistake to believe that interpretation itself is a method. Philosophical hermeneutics concerns itself primarily with the study of the nature of understanding and interpretation, and relates its findings to matters philosophical.

Following Heidegger, Gadamer takes the scope of hermeneutics to include all aspects of human experience. To Gadamer, human experience <u>is</u> hermeneutical. Grasping this, the notion that experience itself is interpretive or hermeneutical, is the key to understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics. We will discuss the interpretive or hermeneutical nature of experience in chapter four.

Gadamer's hermeneutics focuses on the nature of interpretation and seeks to apply his findings to classical problems within philosophy, such as the question of truth and the nature of method. He is concerned with the relationship between hermeneutics and the human sciences and philosophy, and it is to members of these disciplines that his discussion is aimed. This is important and must be kept

in mind, for Gadamer's audience was not intended to include sociologists. It is understandable, therefore, why Gadamer does not explore the significance of his hermeneutics for sociology. With the exception of Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas I am unaware of any efforts to explore the importance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for sociology. As we shall see, however, the respective analyses of Gadamer by Giddens and Habermas are both extremely limited, and provide little toward establishing the significance of his work for sociology.

Plan of the Chapters

This work is not an exercise in abstract theorizing or armchair social-philosophizing. Our interest in hermeneutics stems from questions raised by qualitative social research. It is therefore a practical interest which guides this study, and it is the practical, as well as theoretical, importance of Gadamer's hermeneutics which we aim to establish for sociology. The research that gave rise to this study was performed within the disciplinary matrix known as environmental sociology, a sub-discipline which has so far in its brief existence slighted the interpretive dimensions of social action. We will begin our discussion in chapter two, then, with a general overview of environmental sociology, before turning our attention to a case study of the town of Milford, New Hampshire, where five years ago toxic wastes were found to have contaminated public water supplies. As a research assistant to Professor Lawrence Hamilton, I performed a secondary analysis of survey data from Milford which focused on the citizens' interpretations of the importance of the contamination incident. While we were able to use the statements provided by the townspeople to explain the interpretive change experienced by some of them regarding the importance of water-protection issues, our analysis actually raised more questions than it answered. These questions pointed to the

need for a comprehensive analysis of the nature of interpretation. It was for this reason, after having looked unsuccessfully for such a theory within interpretive sociology, that I came to study the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer. Our discussion in chapter two is thus a means to an end, the end being the central research question of this work: what is the nature of interpretation?

In chapter three we discuss in detail the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, focusing for the most part on his analysis of interpretation as presented in Truth and Method. Because of the importance of Martin Heidegger's work for Gadamer, we will discuss in an extremely selective way several aspects of Heidegger's Being and Time. Through our discussion of Gadamer we will be able to conceptualize an answer to our central research question.

In chapter four we discuss Gadamer's response to his findings regarding the nature of interpretation. As we shall see, his analysis establishes, at least on a theoretical level, that interpretation is prejudiced. By prejudiced Gadamer means that interpretation always includes a prior understanding of its object.[19] In Gadamer's view, the prejudices constitutive of interpretation are in some cases true and in other cases false. What is problematic about the prejudiced nature of interpretation is not its

---

[19] This insight is actually Heidegger's. Gadamer takes this insight and develops it into an elaborate analysis of the linguisticality of understanding and interpretation.

prejudiced nature per se, but the fact that false prejudices are free to constitute false interpretations without our even knowing it. This is because, being preconscious,[20] the truth status of prejudices is taken-for-granted during their moment of application. Gadamer thus calls for the cultivation of an "effective-historical consciousness," a consciousness which admits its prejudiced nature and seeks to become aware of the false prejudices it has typically left unquestioned. After exploring Gadamer's concern over the tyrannical effect of false prejudices we will discuss his notion of hermeneutical reflection, the experience through which one develops an effective-historical consciousness. Before concluding chapter four the nature of hermeneutical reflection is specified in terms of Gadamer's notion of "linguisticality" and discussed in relation to his controversial theory of truth.

Following our exposition of Gadamer's hermeneutics we will discuss in chapter five its critical reception within social theory by examining the writings of Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas. As we shall see, neither of these preeminent social theorists has succeeded in drawing out the

---

[20] The term "preconscious" is used in this study to denote assumptions and linguistical concepts which may be experienced consciously through hermeneutical reflection (reflection on the prejudices which constitute interpretive experience). The term preconscious is thus distinct from subconscious, which typically refers to psychological processes.

sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics in its fullest sense. In Giddens' case, his concern over Gadamer is limited to the theoretical level. While it is true that he demonstrates a general grasp of one of Gadamer's central notions (the notion that understanding is ontological) by successfully applying it in his theory of structuration, it is also true that he misinterprets a number of key Gadamerian points. More importantly, Giddens simply fails to see beyond the general theoretical importance of Gadamer. In the case of Habermas, the sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics is viewed in exclusively methodological terms. Habermas' debate with Gadamer over the nature and scope of hermeneutics, does, however, represent an important contribution on Habermas' behalf to the social-theoretical discourse on Gadamer, and we will discuss the debate in detail. However, aside from Habermas' criticisms of Gadamer, and his methodological interpretation of the importance of his hermeneutics, Habermas offers us little in the way of establishing the full significance of Gadamer's work for sociology. Both Habermas and Giddens overlook the topical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics. That is, they fail to see how Gadamer's work provides us with interesting and important research topics deserving of sociological analysis.

In chapter six we discuss the contributions of interpretive sociology and relate them to Gadamer's analysis

of the nature of interpretation. We begin our discussion with an analysis of Max Weber's conception of interpretive sociology. Our discussion focuses on the fact that Weber has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by his early translators and expounders and consequently has been subject to unwarranted criticism in American sociology. After examining the revisionist Weberian literature we discuss the work of Alfred Schutz, and conclude by analyzing several of G. H. Mead's key concepts.

In chapter seven, the concluding chapter of this study, the theoretical and practical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics is discussed. On the theoretical level we 1) discuss how Gadamer's hermeneutics helps us better to understand the relationship between individual and social structure, and 2) outline the basic principles of a theory of interpretive violence. The latter is accomplished by distinguishing the concepts of "violence" from "power," and then elaborating this distinction in terms of Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation. On the practical level we identify two research topics deserving of sociological research. The first is the topic of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. Following Gadamer, prejudices are operationally defined as preconscious linguistical concepts which are implicitly associated with particular words. It is proposed that through interviewing people and asking them to define the meanings they

implicitly associate with certain words we will be able to study the extent to which prejudices are in fact constitutive of particular interpretations of social reality and social action. The second topic which we propose to study is hermeneutical reflection, the experience through which people come to experience consciously the prejudiced nature of interpretation. Hermeneutical reflection is operationally defined as an experience in which we consciously experience the meaning of linguistical concepts that are typically assumed or taken for granted. It is proposed that through an experimental research design sociologists may study the mediating and transformational effect of hermeneutical reflection on prejudices. In light of Gadamer's methodological critique, this proposition raises interesting methodological questions which are discussed in the final pages of our study.

CHAPTER II

DEFINITION OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

Our interest in Gadamer's hermeneutics grows out of an interest in the relationship between interpretation and environmental concern. It is this original interest, and the problems which we encountered while pursuing it, which constitutes the focus of this chapter. Following a brief overview of the field of environmental sociology our attention turns to a discussion of a case study of immediate environmental concern. This study aims to explain interpretive differences observed in Milford, New Hampshire where five years ago close to half of the town's water supply was lost to toxic contamination. The data set from Milford, collected by Professor Lawrence C. Hamilton, provides a unique opportunity for studying interpretation within the context of environmental sociology. The focus of our analysis falls on examining why some townspeople came to interpret water-protection as an important political issue, while others did not. As we shall see, however, rather than providing answers to the more important questions regarding interpretation and environmental concern, our analysis simply demonstrates the need for a rigorous and thorough analysis of the nature of interpretation itself.

Interpretation and Environmental Sociology

Since 1970 the relationship between society and the environment has attracted an increasing amount of sociological attention.[1] As more sociologists grew concerned with environmental issues and problems, it became clear that a new sociological specialization was emerging- "environmental sociology".[2] Toward the end of the 1970's, some sociologists were claiming that environmental sociology had become a paradigm in its own right.[3]

The principal feature distinguishing environmental sociology from other areas of specialization is its

---

[1] K. D. Van Liere and R. E. Dunlap, "Environmental concern: Does it make a difference how it's measured?" Environment and Behavior, Vol. 13 No. 6, 1981, p. 651.

[2] R. E. Dunlap and W. R. Catton, Jr., "Environmental sociology." Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 5, 1979, p. 243.

[3] This claim was first made by W. R. Catton, Jr. and R. E. Dunlap in their paper "Environmental sociology: a new paradigm." American Sociologist 1978, Vol. 13, pp. 41-49. This claim, is problematic. Generally speaking, while Catton and Dunlap have successfully identified how several of the assumptions held by environmental sociologists diverge from the anthropocentric assumptions of traditional sociology, they have failed to demonstrate how the switch from an anthropocentric world-view to an ecological world-view would qualify, in itself, as a paradigmatic shift. For example, one of Thomas Kuhn's descriptions views paradigms as exemplars which define model problems and methodological approaches for scientists. It is problematic to claim that the overcoming of anthropo- centrism by sociologists would also be accompanied by a fundamental shift in the types of problems and methodological approaches chosen by them. See F. H. Buttel, "Environmental sociology: A new paradigm?" American Sociologist 1978, Vol. 13, pp. 237-256 for an extended discussion of the problems with such a claim.

assumption that society may be affected by "physical" factors which are "non-social" in nature. This assumption diverges from Durkheim's classical definition which views sociology as the process by which "social facts" are explained exclusively in terms of other "social facts."[4]

The "core" of environmental sociology is described as the "study of interactions between environment and society."[5] Its "basic task" involves seeking answers to two types of questions:

(a) How do interdependent variations in population, technology, culture, social systems, and personality systems influence the physical environment?

(b) How do resultant changes (and other variations) in the physical environment modify population, technology, culture, social systems, and personality systems, or any of the interrelations among them?[6]

These descriptions of environmental sociology's core and basic task explicitly emphasize the importance of society's interaction with the environment. However, a review of the literature suggests that the interpretive dimensions of this core process of interaction have generally been ignored by

---

[4] W. R. Catton and R. E. Dunlap, "Environmental sociology: a new paradigm," 1978, p. 44.

[5] Ibid., p. 44.

[6] R. E. Dunlap and W. R. Catton, Jr., "Environmental sociology," 1979, p. 252.

environmental sociologists.[7] If one accepts the premise that interaction is an interpretive as well as biological process, then it becomes clear that environmental sociology must begin to study the interpretive dimensions of social action.

There are a number of reasons why the interpretive dimensions of social action have generally been ignored by environmental sociologists. Perhaps the most important of these reasons stems from environmental sociology's emphasis on "physical" or non-social variables, an emphasis which runs counter to interpretive sociology's emphasis on social meaning and symbolic interaction. The latter viewpoint, for example, is represented by Catton and Dunlap, who argue that "physical" factors become relevant "only if they are perceived and defined as such by the actors."[8] Another reason might be that a fairly extensive literature has emerged from research conducted by environmental

---

[7] Among the more notable exceptions is Levine's Love Canal, which evidences the importance of developing an interpretive tradition within environmental sociology. Levine discovered that "the social actors at Love Canal were affected and behaved according to their perceptions and interpretations of the situation." A. G. Levine, Love Canal: Science, Politics and People, (Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1982), p. 1.

[8] W. R. Catton, Jr. and R. E. Dunlap, "A new ecological paradigm for post-exuberant sociology." American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 24 No.1, 1980, p. 21.

psychologists, who have paid a "fair amount of attention"[9] to the cognitive levels of interaction.[10] However, from an interpretive-sociological perspective, the approach of environmental psychologists appears deficient in several respects. When the cognitive and behavioral levels of societal-environmental interaction are approached from an exclusively psychological perspective, numerous societal-level factors are excluded from the analysis, and what is, in reality, a social process becomes reduced to a psychological one. Two of the more typical psychological reductions involve 1) treating the process of stimulus and response in a behaviorist fashion, that is, explaining output (response) exclusively in terms of input (stimulus); and 2) treating the individual, or "self," as a separate unit of analysis detached from larger societal influences.

From an interpretive standpoint, stimulus and response are viewed as a process which includes an <u>interpretive individual</u>, who mediates the meaning of the situation; and the individual or "self" is viewed as a <u>social</u> being whose personality and interpretive abilities are constituted via language and symbolic interaction with other social beings and institutions. When the differences between interpretive sociology and psychology are considered in terms of the core

---

[9] R. E. Dunlap, and W. R. Catton, Jr., "Environmental sociology," 1979, p. 253.

[10] See D. Stokols, "Environmental psychology." Annual Review of Psychology, 1978, Vol. 29, pp. 253-295.

and basic task of environmental sociology, the benefits of applying interpretive-sociological theory within environmental sociology are clear. Unfortunately, as we shall see, interpretive sociology has yet to provide a comprehensive analysis of the nature of interpretation. Hence, the assistance which interpretive sociology can provide regarding the process of interpretation as it relates to environmental concern is itself quite limited. It is this realization that leads us to the study of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

There have been numerous empirical studies of environmental concern[11] and they have enabled sociologists to gain a general understanding of its social bases.[12] The bulk of these studies, however, emphasize the relationship between environmental concern and demographic variables, and typically underemphasize or ignore cognitive variables. Van Liere and Dunlap recognize the importance of cognitive variables and argue that

> in order to achieve a better understanding of the social bases of environmental concern researchers .... (should) pay at least as much attention to the cognitive as to the demographic determinants of

---

[11] See R. E. Dunlap and K. D. Van Liere, "Environmental concern: a bibliography of environmental studies and brief appraisal of the literature," in Public Administration Series Bibliography 44, (Monticello, Illinois: Vance Bibliographies, 1978).

[12] K. D. Van Liere and R. E. Dunlap, "The social bases of environmental concern: A review of hypotheses, explanations and empirical evidence." Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 44, 1980, pp. 181-197.

support for environmental protection.[13]

The importance of considering cognitive variables in addition to demographic variables has been emphasized by other environmental sociologists.[14]

It is encouraging that environmental sociology is beginning to recognize the need to account for the mediating capability of social actors. It is unfortunate, however, that this capability is referred to as a "cognitive" variable. The problem with viewing the mediating capability of social actors, or "knowledgeability," as a cognitive variable is that it suggests that our interpretive faculty is exclusively psychological in nature.[15] On the contrary, interpretation is viewed within interpretive sociology as an intersubjective process involving the mediation of shared meaning. As we shall see in chapter six, Max Weber states explicitly that interpretive sociology is not a part of psychology. It should be clear, then, that the effort to account for the knowledgeability of social actors within environmental sociology (and sociology in general) should focus on the social process of interpretation, rather than

---

[13] Ibid., p. 194.

[14] For example, L. C. Hamilton, "Concern about toxic wastes: Three demographic predictors." Sociological Perspectives, 1985, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 463-486.

[15] In Anthony Giddens' Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), the term "knowledgeability" is used to signify the mediating capability of social actors.

on psychological or cognitive processes.[16]

Our analysis of interpretation within the context of environmental sociology concerns differences in expressions of environmental concern. Implicit in the literature on environmental concern is a distinction between two types of environmental concern. These types may be termed "immediate" and "non-immediate." Before proceeding with our discussion of the Milford case study it will prove worthwhile to discuss the distinction between these distinct types of environmental concern.

As Schnaiberg points out, the "environmental movement" is "suffienctly diverse that a question arises as to whether it is really proper to label such diversity with a single name."[17] This diversity stems from the different concerns held by various environmental groups, and also from differences in their "prescriptions for appropriate social changes." While the type and intensity of their environmental concern vary widely, all environmentalists are

---

[16] This is not to say that there are no successful attempts to examine cognitive processes from a sociological perspective. For example, Aaron Cicourel has developed an area of research which he terms "cognitive sociology," which carefully takes into consideration the intersubjective or social nature of cognitive processes. See Aaron Cicourel, Cognitive Sociology (London: MacMillan, 1973). Nevertheless I believe the term "interpretive" is better suited to denote the process whereby people experience meaning in everyday life, for it explicitly acknowledges the constitutive importance of the other and society in general for the experience of meaning.

[17] A. Schnaiberg, The Environment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 366.

committed to the same broad goal of protecting the environment.[18] Environmentalists tend to be younger, well-educated, and politically liberal.[19]

The broad concern over "protecting the environment," typical of professional environmentalists and members of national pro-environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, Friends of the Earth, and Environmental Action is very different than the type of concern found among the many local grassroots citizens' groups that have emerged to protest local environmental problems.[20] For example, Hamilton has found that in the absence of immediate problems with community water supplies, water protection is typically viewed as an

---

[18] N. Freudenberg, Not In Our Backyards (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), p. 252.

[19] The description of environmentalists as "politically liberal" must be treated with caution, as there appears to be considerable diversity among contemporary environmentalists when it comes to liberalism and conservatism (see Kirkpatrick Sale, "The forest for the trees: Can today's environmentalists tell the difference?" Mother Jones, November, 1986, pp. 25-58.

[20] According to Will Collette of the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, Inc., there are no less than 1700 citizens' groups in existence in North America (50 in Canada) fighting problems related to toxic wastes. Between 1982, when figures were first collected, and 1985, these groups were emerging at an approximate rate of 200 per year. Between 1985 and April of 1987, more than a thousand of these groups emerged either to protest the discovery of local toxic contamination or to fight the proposal of toxic waste dump sites or other threatening facilities. See N. Freudenberg's Not In Our Backyards (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984) for a comprehensive descriptive analysis of the history and development of such groups.

"environmental" issue, with concern strongest among the more educated and environmentally active citizens.[21] However, when a crisis appears, such as the discovery that local water supplies have been contaminated with toxic chemicals, water protection becomes viewed as a "health and safety" issue, and concern does not correlate with education. "Younger adults, parents of young children, and women are the groups most concerned after contamination has been discovered".[22] The principal distinction, then, between local or "immediate" environmental concern and general or "non-immediate" concern is the fact that the former is prompted by an immediate threat to the health and safety of one's family and one's self, while the latter is not.

This distinction between "immediate" and "non-immediate" environmental concern can be likened to Deitz's distinction between "acute" and "chronic" risks.[23] "Immediate"

---

[21] L. C. Hamilton, Public Response to the Discovery of Water Contamination, (Durham, H. H.: Water Resource Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 1985).

[22] Ibid., p. 1.

[23] T. Dietz, "Comments on Perrow's 'Normal' Accidents..." Environmental Sociology: Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's Section on Environmental Sociology, Winter 1987. I am using the term "acute" in a broad sense here for it often takes years for the physiological effects of contamination exposure and ingestion to emerge. The interpretive and behavioral effects are more "acute" than the physiological effects since the discovery of contamination may directly affect one's routine, habits, and worldview. Dietz uses the distinction in the context of natural and man-made "disasters," while I am using it in the context of environmental concern.

environmental concern is typically a response to acute health and safety risks posed by an environmental anomaly. "Non-immediate" or general environmental concern is typically a response to the chronic risks posed by our anthropocentric, techno-industrial, socio-economic system.

"Immediate" and "non-immediate" environmental concern can be further distinguished in terms of attitude, motivation and intention. Attitudinally, immediate environmental concern may be thought of as a "not in our backyard" attitude, compared to the "not anywhere" attitude of the non-immediately concerned.[24] The intentions of these groups is also different. The "immediately" concerned generally aim to recover what might be considered to be a a normal relation to their environment by forcing government officials to eliminate the problem which is threatening

---

[24] According to Will Collette (see note #20), while the concern of the citizens' groups stems from a "not in our backyard" attitude at first, it often broadens into a "not anywhere" attitude once the immediate problem is solved. Many of these groups have expanded their interests and have grown into state, regional and even national organizations (for example, The Williamstown Health and Safety Committee grew into a state level organization called Vermonters Organized for Cleanup, and now consists of more than 20 community groups; the Love Canal Homeowners Association, organized by Lois Gibbs, grew into the National Clearinghouse for Toxic Waste, Inc.). While a figure is not available on how many of the citizens' groups actually act more broadly once their immediate problem is solved, it is clear that many groups have had considerable impact beyond their immediate community.

them.[25] By contrast, environmentalists are primarily concerned with protecting the environment from present and future abuses.

Grassroots citizens' groups are motivated by health and safety risks posed by their close proximity to an environmental problem.[26] By contrast, environmentalists may not be subjected to any acute environmental problems, and are motivated by general environmental concerns. These differences between immediate and non-immediate environmental concern are summarized below in table 1.

Table 1. Differentiation of immediate and non-immediate environmental concern

Immediate environmental concern	Non-immediate environmental concern
"not in our backyard"	"not anywhere"
recover environment	protect environment
health & safety is threatened	environmental quality is threatened
younger adults, parents with young children and women	younger adults, higher educated and politically liberal

[25] "Generally" because some citizens' groups organize to protest a proposal of some kind, such as the building of a toxic waste dump in their community.

[26] Proximity to contamination problems is an important determinant of environmental concern (see L. C. Hamilton "Concern about toxic wastes: Three demographic predictors," 1985; A. G. Levine, Love Canal, 1982; N. Freudenberg, Not In Our Backyards, 1984).

Immediate Environmental Concern in Milford

The environmental concern observed in Milford, New Hampshire following the discovery of toxic contamination of one of its main wells is an example of immediate environmental concern. The environmental concern in Milford was immediate and local, and limited exclusively to a concern over a problem in the town's own "backyard." The impetus for the concern was clearly the threat to the health and safety of townspeople, as well as the inconvenience resulting from the loss of a safe water supply. The aim of the concern was to conserve the water supplies that were not contaminated, and to secure a new water supply as soon as possible. And, as is generally the case with immediate environmental concern, concern in Milford was strongest among younger adults, parents with young children, and women.

On February 15, 1983 the residents of Milford, New Hampshire (population 8685) were informed that their public water supply had been contaminated by toxic wastes.[27] Routine state testing had detected unsafe levels of chlorinated hydrocarbons in the Savage well, which had

---

[27] The Milford survey data were collected and first analyzed by Professor Lawrence C. Hamilton. This discussion of the Milford Case Study is based on an earlier paper entitled "Reflectivity and toxic wastes: An empirical, Meadian analysis," which I co-authored with Professor Hamilton and presented to the Environmental Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association during its annual meeting in New York, NY, August 30, 1986.

provided the town with 40% of its total water supply.[28] Following the discovery of the contamination, town officials "promptly took steps to notify the public, and closed down the well from which the contaminated samples had been drawn."[29]

While it was unclear exactly who or what was responsible for the contamination, suspicion pointed to one or more of the four manufacturing firms located near the Savage well. According to Hamilton, between the years 1948 and 1979 one or more of these firms had been dumping chemicals in the town landfill, located within the same aquifer. Interestingly, in 1978 one of the industries was involved in a clean-up after heavy metals were discovered overflowing from the firm's property into a drainage swale. However, because there was "no capability to test for volatile organic chemicals at the level of parts per billion" the possibility that the contamination might have affected

---

[28] According to Hamilton, chlorinated hydrocarbons are commonly used as industrial degreasers. The testing had been been performed by the Water Supply and Pollution Control Commission. L. C. Hamilton, Household Conservation During Water Emergencies: Two Case Studies (Durham, NH: Water Resource Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 1984), p. 2.1.

[29] As Hamilton points out, "The actual concentrations reported were "only" two to five times higher than those considered safe. The problem was thus perceived as serious, but not acute, and it received little attention outside of the local area. In New Hampshire alone, there were at least 44 other sites listed as posing a similar "imminent threat" to public health at that time." Household Conservation During Water Emergencies, 1984, p. 2.1.

ground water supplies was not investigated.[30]

Along with the notification of the contamination came a plea for voluntary conservation. As water demands increased with the advent of spring, the town placed restrictions on outdoor water use in May. Efforts were being undertaken to secure a new well in neighboring Amherst, New Hampshire, but this well would not come on-line until July. While the restrictions issued in May were successful, the town nevertheless found it necessary to ban outdoor water use on June 22.[31] In early July the Amherst well came on-line, and on July 18 it was announced that the shortage was officially over.

As in more serious water contamination incidents, such as the one experienced in upstate New York's Love Canal, visible health effects were apparently not widely noticed in Milford. In the case of Love Canal, visible health effects were the impetus to testing; in Milford, contamination was discovered through routine state testing. In addition, unlike Love Canal where the entanglement of special interests with the local political apparatus resulted in foot-dragging and stalling, the response of Milford

---

[30] Ibid., p. 2.2.

[31] The town threatened to cut-off the water-service of violators of this ban. Hamilton reports that within the first week of the ban 15 warnings were issued, but no actual cut-offs occurred. Household Conservation During Water Emergencies, 1984, p. 2.5.

officials to the contamination incident was immediate and direct. For these reasons there was no need for Milfordians to organize to force political action from their local or state government, as is often the case when water supplies become contaminated.

Nevertheless, the Milford incident presents itself as an interesting social phenomenon. Since the Milford data set contains open-ended questions that asked townspeople for their comments and opinions regarding the incident, it provides an excellent opportunity for studying the interpretive dimensions of immediate environmental concern.[32] The analysis discussed below aims to understand and explain the interpretive differences among the Milford townspeople regarding the political importance of water-protection issues in the wake of the contamination incident.

---

[32] Professor Hamilton's primary concern was the response of townspeople to Milford's water conservation program.

The Milford Case Study

Shortly after the February anouncement informing residents of the contamination Professor Lawrence Hamilton collected survey data[33] revealing widespread concern over the crisis. In a follow-up survey conducted by Hamilton, residents were asked to compare the level of importance which they attached to "protecting the town water supply" before the contamination incident, to how they felt after it had occurred. Townspeople who acknowledged experiencing a change in their interpretation of the importance of water protection issues were asked to explain the cause of the change. Our analysis focuses on the written statements provided by townspeople in answer to this question.

The measurement technique used, called numerical magnitude estimation, is explained in detail in Hamilton's original report of the findings. Briefly, it consists of asking respondents to choose any number, relative to a fixed reference criterion, in order to describe the magnitude of the importance of a specific issue or concern. The principal benefit of magnitude estimates is that they provide interval level measurements without the truncation of extreme opinions that can happen in fixed-choice ordinal

---

[33] A copy of the survey and details regarding response rate may be found in Household Conservation During Water Emergencies, 1984.

scales.[34] The magnitude estimate questions on this survey provided respondents with an opportunity to say how much their interpretations of the importance of water protection had changed. The open-ended follow-up question provided them with an opportunity to explain, in their own words, why their interpretation had changed.

A total of 163 respondents provided magnitude estimates of the importance of "protecting town water supplies" before and after the contamination had occurred. The estimates provided indicated that half of these people (49.7%) thought protecting water supplies to be equally important, both before and after the contamination was discovered. Three people (1.8%) stated that they now thought water protection was less important than they had previously thought, presumably reflecting a feeling that the contamination problem had been exaggerated. The remainder of the respondents (48.5%) indicated that they now thought water protection to be more important in light of the contamination incident. It is reasonable to suspect that actual interpretive changes were even more widespread, but many people preferred not to admit that they had previously been complacent about potential water-contamination problems.

On the survey following the magnitude estimate question

---

[34] This technique was developed by M. Lodge in Magnitude Scaling: Quantitative Measurement of Opinions (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981).

was an open-ended question that asked those who experienced a change in their interpretation of the importance of water safety to explain why. Sixty-seven of the seventy-nine respondents who had indicated interpretive change provided written statements in response to this question. While some of these statements were ambiguous, sixty of the sixty-seven statements included explanations for the changes. Among these sixty statements, twenty-four provided explicit reasons for their increased concern over water protection. These statements were categorized according to their degree of specificity and are presented below in tables 2. and 3.

Table 2. Specific statements explaining change in environmental concern in Milford.

1) "... having a shortage of water made our family appreciate the importance of such a natural resource."

2) "... short supply makes one realize the importance of water."

3) "... we don't realize how important water is until it is in short supply."

4) "... we felt the loss of water and can more so realize its importance."

5) "... fear of ever losing it (clean water) made me realize even more not to take it for granted."

6) "... when an abundant water supply is not available, you immediately realize its importance."

7) "... problems with polluted wells made me more aware of the need for fresh water that is free from contaminants."

8) "... the recent emergency made me more aware of the importance of protecting our water supply."

Table 3. General statements explaining change in environmental concern in Milford.

1) "... one's level of consciousness is raised significantly when problems occur or issues come to a head."

2) "... we don't really feel the impact of a crisis until it directly affects our lives. It makes one pause and think about environmental problems."

3) "... concern is always greater when presented with (a) crisis situation."

4) "... the importance of pure water ... becomes more vivid when the problem strikes home."

5) "... you never worry about water until the well runs dry."

6) "... when the crunch comes people realize how important something is and take steps to protect it."

7) "... the possibility of the occurrence of water problems was brought to my attention by this incident."

8) "... I have increased awareness of the need to have water."

9) "... I simply realize more fully how susceptible our water supply is to toxic contamination."

10) "... this problem never really made an impact on me until it hit home."

11) "... before the water crisis I never worried about a water problem."

12) "... I never really gave the water situation much thought before the problem arose."

13) "... since we had no problems never gave it a thought."

14) "... until this happened I really didn't think much about water supply."

15) "... I had not considered our water supply an important issue until complications set in."

16) "... it was a rude awakening to realize that we are not immune from such serious problems."

Reflectivity and Interpretive Change

As we shall see in chapter six, the social-theoretical options available to the sociologist studying interpretation are extremely limited. While in Max Weber's work we find the methodological grounding of an "interpretive sociology," as well as programmatic statements regarding its purpose and task, Weber does not inquire into the nature of interpretation itself. This shortcoming of Weber's is in fact the point of departure for Alfred Schutz's conceptualization of phenomenological sociology. However, as we shall see, Schutz's approach to the study of interpretation is formalistic and sterile and incapable of guiding a substantive analysis of interpretive differences. In the work of G. H. Mead, however, we find an analysis of reflectivity which may be used to study the interpretive differences observed in Milford. Despite the fact that Mead does not study interpretation per se, he does provide a comprehensive theory which explains the emergence of "mind" and meaning, and discusses the process of social action in terms of one's interpretations of the expectations of others. Thus, while limited, Mead's thoughts on reflectivity may be used to analyze the interpretive differences observed in Milford.

Mead deals extensively with the process of reflection in the collection of writings published posthumously under the

rubric The Philosophy of the Act (1938).[35] His approach conceptualizes the human act as a process consisting of a series of stages. According to Mead, the human act differs fundamentally from the actions of animals in that it contains a "manipulatory" stage. Language enables us to bring into our "manipulatory" field objects which are not immediately present. This enables us to "rehearse" probable outcomes of possible actions within our mind and make "reflective" decisions regarding our behavior.[36]

According to Mead, reflection emerges as a response to problematic situations. Problematic situations are encountered when we experience obstacles en route to the realization of goals.[37]

> Reflective thinking arises in testing the means which are presented for carrying out some hypothetical way of continuing action which has been checked.[38]

It follows from this pragmatic view of reflection that we

---

[35] The majority of sociological writings which refer to Mead draw from the collection of his writings entitled Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). Recently, The Philosophy of the Act (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938) has attracted an increasing amount of attention. One of the more ambitious and comprehensive attempts to draw out the sociological import of this collection is Robert S. Perinbanayagam's Signifying Acts, 1985.

[36] G. H. Mead, The Philosophy of the Act, 1938, pp. 79-83.

[37] I am here translating Mead's behaviorist vocabulary into common verbage. Mead's actual definition of a problematic situation is "frustrated impulse."

[38] G. H. Mead, The Philosophy of the Act, 1938, p. 79.

tend to accept things as they are until experience tells us otherwise, that is, until the realization of a goal is frustrated. Interestingly, the statements provided in tables 2. and 3. are completely consistent with Mead's view of reflection, and may, in fact, be viewed as empirical evidence in support of his view that reflection emerges as a response to problematic situations. For example, among the specific statements presented in table 2., comments such as "short supply makes one realize ..." and "shortage of water made our family appreciate ..." claim a causal relation between the problematic effects of contamination and interpretive change.

On another level, many of the comments lend credence to the related notion that human behavior generally tends to be habitual and unreflective. For example, the statement "... you never worry about your water until the well runs dry" suggests that in lieu of experience which contradicts the assumptions of normalcy and status quo such assumptions will remain unquestioned. That is, they will continue to be left un-thought or unreflected upon.

While these data may be cited as empirical evidence in support of Mead's thoughts on reflectivity, it is not our intention to test Mead's thoughts empirically. Our intention instead is to employ Mead's concepts to explain the interpretive differences which we observed in Milford. Mead's thoughts on reflectivity may be used to explain why

some townspeople came to view the protection of water supplies as an important political issue following the crisis while others did not. We may begin by studying the statements presented in tables 2. and 3. from a Meadian perspective.

According to Mead, we will interpret a situation as problematic if it appears as an obstacle to the realization of goals. We can establish several of the goals held by the townspeople who came to view water protection as important by studying their statements presented in tables 2. and 3. When we examine these statements three explicit reasons for the interpretive change are evident: 1) "fear" (of losing clean water); 2) "short supply" (of water); and "inconvenience" (resulting from reduced and/or contaminated supply). When these reasons are understood in terms of Mead's thoughts on reflectivity, specific goals can be deduced from the reasons provided. Fear of losing clean water suggests the goal of clean water; short supply suggests the goal of adequate or abundant water supply; and inconvenience suggests the goal of convenient access to a water supply. Coming full circle we can explain the interpretive change experienced by this group as follows. Toxic contamination of water supplies in Milford was an obstacle to the realization of goals (clean water, adequate or abundant supply, convenient access to a water supply). Experiencing these obstacles gave rise to reflection, and

subsequently, interpretive change.

The unchanged interpretations are more difficult to explain.[39] The magnitude estimate measurement technique discussed earlier was used to ask respondents to estimate the importance of water protection issues as compared with a fixed reference criterion. The reference criterion in this case was "routine town business," which was assigned an arbitrary numerical value of 20.[40] It is interesting that, even after experiencing the contamination, 35% of those surveyed stated that they did not interpret the protection of town water supplies to be any more important than routine-town business. In terms of Mead's thoughts on reflectivity, this means either one of two things. Either 1) these people failed to view the contamination incident as a problematic situation, or 2) having interpreted the incident as a problematic situation, they reflectively decided that the incident was no more important than routine town business. Let us examine each of these possibilities.

Regarding possibility number one, when we consider the

---

[39] This is largely due to the fact that the Milford follow-up survey lacked an open-ended question specifically directed at respondents who did not experience interpretive change.

[40] Hamilton operationally defined "routine town business" as "... decisions about police, fire, and ambulance services, public employee salaries, public works contracts, and zoning decisions." This description is taken from the Milford follow-up survey which can be found in appendix B, in Hamilton's Household Conservation During Wtaer Emergencies, 1984.

universality of the goals found among members of the "changed" group (i.e., clean, accessible, and adequate supply of water), it defies common sense to think that such goals would not be found to be held by members of the "unchanged" group. In fact, these goals may very well be considered basic needs. It is unlikely, then, given the basic importance of what was threatened by the contamination, that any resident of Milford could have come to view the contamination as anything but a problem.

This brings us to possibility number two. Possibility number two suggests that the unchanged group might have viewed the contamination as a problematic situation, but upon reflection, decided that, while a problem, the issue of water safety was nevertheless no more important than routine town business. This, however, is unlikely, for it is counter-intuitive to think that once the issue was viewed as a problem it then could have been viewed with no more importance than the routine and mundane aspects of town business.

The unlikelihood of both of these possibilities suggests an inherent limitation in using Mead's thoughts on reflectivity to explain the interpretive differences observed in Milford. It appears that his view breaks down when it is applied in this context because it reduces the interpretive process to a means-ends relation. As in all cases of means-ends discernment, the ends present no

problems when they are readily apparent or given. For example, given the end or goal of clean, accessible and adequate supplies of water, it is easy to explain how one might come to interpret the need to give political priority to water safety protection. In this case, political priority to water protection may be viewed as the means to the ends mentioned above. However, when the goals or ends are not given, and must be decided, Mead's approach tells us little, for such reflective acts are no longer responses to the frustrated attainment of ends or goals, but instead concern decisions regarding the values of goals themselves.

Within the context of studying interpretation, Mead's thoughts on reflectivity appear limited in another sense. The view that reflection is a response to problematic situations appears meaningless when we realize that people differ in their interpretations of what constitutes problematic situations. This does not amount to a rejection of Mead's thoughts on reflectivity; it simply demonstrates the limitations of his approach when it comes to explaining interpretive differences. As we have seen, at least two aspects of Mead's view of reflection are supported empirically by the Milford data set. The first is Mead's general view that the frustration of goals leads to reflection. This generalization, however, must be qualified for the frustration of goals is only one of several conditions for reflectivity. That this is the case is

supported by the argument that decisions over the meaning of values involve reflective thought prompted by concerns which are not the result of the frustration of goals, but rather, the result of an interest in meaning and value for their own sake.

The second aspect of Mead's view that is supported by the data pertains to the notion that human interpretation tends to be habitual and unreflective. That is, the Milford data suggest that people tend to assume that things are acceptable until this assumption is contradicted by experience. It is this aspect of Mead's view which is particularly interesting because it is supported not only by the Milford data, but by case studies of towns where similar contamination problems surfaced, and by the bulk of interpretive-sociological research. The general tendency regarding immediate environmental concern is that the safety of one's local environment is taken-for-granted until experienced to be otherwise. As Professor Hamilton and I stated in an earlier paper, this tendency is unfortunate, for if the concern and activism so often visible in the wake of contamination crises had only been present prior to such incidents, the effects of the contamination could have been minimized or eliminated in the first place. This observation raises serious questions about the nature of human interpretation, questions the implications of which reach well beyond the boundaries of environmental sociology.

The habitual or "assuming" nature of interpretation observed in Milford suggests that the nature of interpretation may be inherently problematic. Milfordians took the safety of their water for granted until they were told otherwise. In this case the nature of interpretation may be construed as problematic on the basis of the argument that had the safety of the water not been taken for granted, preventative measures, such as proper industrial zoning, could have been established, that could have eliminated the cause of the contamination in the first place.

From our observations of immediate environmental concern in Milford it is safe to say that the nature of interpretation calls for rigorous empirical analysis. In light of the fact that the nature of interpretation has received limited attention within interpretive sociology, a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the nature of interpretation must be considered a necessary preliminary to its empirical study. Moreover, given the limited discussion of the nature of interpretation within interpretive sociology it is clear that in order to conduct a comprehensive study of interpretation we must go beyond the confines of sociology.

Given these observations, the central research question of this work is the following: what is the nature of interpretation? In addition, in light of our observations regarding the habitual or taken-for-granted nature of

interpretation, we will want to ask in what sense might the nature of interpretation be considered problematic? Once we have answered these questions we will be able to outline the empirical study of interpretation within sociology and establish the importance of conducting such research. In order to analyze the nature of interpretation we will turn to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is our view that it is in Gadamer's work, in particular in his major work Truth and Method, that we find the most comprehensive analysis of the nature of interpretation available today. Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation therefore presents itself as our central focus.

CHAPTER III

THE NATURE OF INTERPRETATION

We may define our research problem as a threefold task consisting of the following questions.

1) What is the nature of interpretation?

2) Is interpretation inherently problematic?

3) What are the implications of the answers to these questions for sociology?

In this chapter we will seek to answer the first two of these questions by analyzing the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The focus of our discussion falls primarily on Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation, as presented in Truth and Method.[1] Because some of his key concepts are appropriated from Martin Heidegger, our discussion of Gadamer necessitates a discussion of Heidegger. Our discussion of Heidegger is extremely selective, however, focusing for the most part on his conception of understanding as presented in Being and Time.[2] We will, however, briefly discuss the traditional

---

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Crossroad, 1986), translated and edited by Garrett Barden and John Cumming from the second German edition, originally published in English in 1975. The first German edition was published in 1960.

[2] Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey before returning to our discussion of Gadamer in order to illustrate the historical importance of Heidegger and Gadamer for the general development of hermeneutics.

Our discussion of Gadamer focuses on his analysis of the nature of interpretation as presented in Truth and Method. According to Gadamer, interpretation is by nature prejudiced. This claim is based on Heidegger's argument that interpretation depends on a preconscious understanding of its object. Gadamer goes beyond Heidegger, however, by focusing his attention on explicating the linguistic nature of understanding and interpretation, a dimension which Heidegger identifies but does not elaborate upon. On the basis of Gadamer's view of the linguistic nature of understanding we are able to operationally define "prejudices" as preconscious linguistical concepts.

Gadamer comes to define the prejudiced nature of interpretation as the hermeneutical problem; that is, as a problem which affects all forms of interpretive experience. It is in this sense that Gadamer makes the claim that the scope of hermeneutics is universal. Gadamer's response to the universality of the hermeneutical problem is hermeneutical reflection, which will be analyzed in chapters four through seven.

An Overview of Gadamer's Truth and Method

Hans-Georg Gadamer was born in Germany in 1900, studied philosophy by way of philology under Martin Heidegger and others at Marburg, and later became full professor at Heidelberg following the Second World War.[3] No stranger to America, he has spent numerous semesters conducting seminars in philosophy at Boston College. His magnum opus, Truth and Method, was first published in German in 1960. The second edition of the work became available in English in 1975.

It should be emphasized that Gadamer is not the least bit concerned with sociology's purpose or problems. Gadamer is first and foremost a philosopher, and it is for philosophy that his efforts are explicitly intended. When he refers to the "human sciences" he does so in reference to history, philosophy, legal studies, theology and aesthetics, making no mention of sociology. This presents the sociologist reading his work with a difficult task, for any significance it may hold for sociology must be discerned indirectly by way of philosophy.

From a sociologist's perspective it is reasonable to ask, given Gadamer's ambivalence toward sociology, why should we bother to concern ourselves with him? Moreover,

---

[3] For an insightful discussion of Gadamer's intellectual background see R. Sullivan's introduction to his translation of Gadamer's Philosophical Apprenticeships (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985). This work is an autobiographical account of Gadamer's intellectual development.

in what sense might philosophy be considered relevant to sociology more generally? The answer to the first question is simple: despite Gadamer's ambivalence toward sociology, his analysis of interpretation speaks directly to our central research problem. Regarding the second question, the practical importance of philosophy may be explained by way of reference to a point made by a philosopher at a recent public lecture.[4] When addressing the question of the relevance of philosophy, the professor stated that perhaps the most tangible, practical feature of philosophy has to do with the "annoyance factor." The annoyance factor refers to philosophy's ability to raise questions which are uncomfortable to consider, never mind answer. In this sense, philosophy may assist sociology by providing it with challenging questions and research topics. In light of this Gadamer appears on target when he states that philosophical hermeneutics may "open new dimensions of questioning" in the sciences.[5] It will be argued in chapter seven that the more significant implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics for sociology turn on its ability to present to sociology important and interesting research topics and questions.

---

[4] This point was made in a lecture given in the spring of 1988 at the University of New Hampshire by Professor Charlotte Witt of the philosophy department of the University of New Hampshire.

[5] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, translated and edited by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 39.

In Truth and Method Gadamer traces the history of the human sciences and hermeneutics and enters into a dialogue with its principal representatives. These representatives include Plato and Aristotle as well as several pre-Socratic Greek philosophers; modern philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger and numerous figures from the German romanticist and historicist traditions, including Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Truth and Method is not systematic in its philosophical analysis of hermeneutics, and as Howard points out, it "is a far-ranging and difficult work."[6] What makes the work difficult is Gadamer's style of exposition. Unlike the approach of many philosophers, he does not "simply state the theses that he seeks to defend, and argue for them in the usual manner." He instead proceeds indirectly by "interpreting, questioning, and conversing with texts."[7] While the title of the work suggests a comparative analysis of the concepts of "truth" and "method," Gadamer's comparison is extremely subtle and more suggestive than definitive. In fact, Gadamer never once in the work provides definitions of the terms which form the center of his analysis. This approach may frustrate some, for the meaning of the work cannot be

---

[6] Roy J. Howard, Three Faces of Hermeneutics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 122.

[7] Richard Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 114.

plucked from any one passage or summary; nor can Gadamer be pinned down regarding exactly what he means by "truth" and "method." Nevertheless, the tension which Gadamer establishes between these two concepts permeates the entire work, and a careful reading of it shows that his interpretation of the relationship between truth and method is anything but ambiguous. As Bernstein points out, in Gadamer's Truth and Method

> themes, concepts, and interpretations enter and interweave in his reflections so that they mutually support each other and exhibit a textured vision of philosophical hermeneutics, and how it is revelatory of human finitude.[8]

Explaining Gadamer's subtle yet critical distinction between truth and method may be done in several ways. For example, one could focus on Gadamer's extensive treatment of aesthetic experience (in Part One of Truth and Method) and explain how he demonstrates that the experience of art is a limiting case of method's claim to truth. That is, we experience an interpretation of the meaning of art which is true for us regardless of methodological considerations. Such experiences are therefore beyond the jurisdiction of method. This would be one way of illustrating Gadamer's critique of method. However, I believe a better way would be to refer to Gadamer's analysis of experience as it relates to the core of scientific research, which is

---

[8] Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 1983, p. 114.

experimental experience. Gadamer shows how the experimental experience in science has the same structure as common experience. This means that the truth which science claims through experimentation and replication is derived, most primarily, from experience itself. This insight is extremely important for it is the key to understanding Gadamer's distinction between quotidian understanding and thematized or methodological knowledge.

> Modern science ... carries through in its methodology what experience has always striven after. Experience is valid only if it is confirmed; hence its dignity depends on its fundamental repeatability. But this means that experience, by its very nature, abolishes its history. This is even true of everyday experience, and how much more for any scientific version of it. Thus it is not just a chance one-sided emphasis of modern scientific theory, but has foundation in fact, that the theory of experience is related teleologically to the truth that is derived from it.[9]

This is perhaps the most crucial point of Gadamer's conception of the relationship between truth and method. That which is true is given in experience, whether it be quotidian experience or a "planned" experience such as that which takes place during a scientific experiment.

> The fact that experience is valid, so long as it is not contradicted by new experience, is clearly characteristic of the general nature of experience, no matter whether we are dealing with its scientific form, in the modern experiment, or with the experience of daily life that men have always had.[10]

We will discuss Gadamer's conception of truth in greater

---

[9] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 311, author's emphasis.

[10] Ibid., p. 314.

detail later in this chapter. What is important at this point is to realize that Truth and Method is not a rejection of scientific research. It is an exposition of the interpretive nature of human experience, and as such provides us with a more complete picture of what scientific research is as compared with common interpretive experience. Scientific experience is a special case of interpretive experience, a derivative mode of interpretation the truth claims of which are grounded not in scientific theory, but in the structure of experience itself.

While Gadamer's explication of the limitations of scientific method is very important, it is not the aspect with which our discussion is most concerned. We are primarily concerned with Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation. Indeed, it is through his analysis of the nature of interpretation that Gadamer is able to demonstrate the derivative nature of scientific experience. Perhaps more importantly, however, through his analysis of the nature of interpretation Gadamer is able demonstrate the prejudiced condition of interpretation and redefine the hermeneutical problem.[11] As we shall see, it is Gadamer's re-conceptualization of the hermeneutical problem, and his

---

[11] The term "hermeneutical problem" is used generally to denote the problems associated with interpretation, problems which were the concern of traditional hermeneutics. In the work of Gadamer, the "hermeneutical problem" takes on universal significance in that he demonstrates how the conditions of interpretation are part of the structure of experience itself.

response to it, which is the key to grasping the essential importance of his hermeneutics for sociology.

It should be clear, then, that in Gadamer's view, hermeneutics is not at all limited to a critique of scientific method, nor is it limited to the problem of method at all.[12] Gadamer's hermeneutics concerns the interpretive and linguistic nature of experience itself. His hermeneutics "is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences."[13] The aim of Truth and Method is to reveal the interpretive nature of common and methodological experience. In Gadamer's own words, his intention is:

... to discover and bring into consciousness

---

[12] Sociologists must be careful not to misinterpret Gadamer's argument as an attempt to debunk science. It cannot be over-emphasized that his aim regarding scientific method is to demonstrate that it does not have a monopoly on truth. Essentially, his is an argument that establishes what scientific method actually is, as distinguished from what it is typically interpreted as. While his approach is fundamentally different from the respective scientific analyses of Kuhn or Wittgenstein, Gadamer's conclusion regarding science is generally the same in that he argues that scientific reasoning is not a primary but derivative mode of interpretation. In Kuhn science is derivative in the sense that political and personal characteristics often motivate scientists to act in self-interested defense of decaying theoretical corpora, suggesting that the sub-culture of science cannot be logically disentangled from one's more primary social situation. See Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). In Wittgenstein, science is considered derivative in that it is a language game dependent on a much broader, non-scientific, or "meta-language" game. See Susan Heckman, Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 117-129, for a comparison of Wittgenstein and Gadamer.

[13] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986. p. xiii.

> something that methodological disputes serve only to conceal and neglect, something that does not so much confine or limit modern science as precede it and make it possible.[14]

What Gadamer succeeds in bringing into consciousness is the constitutive importance of our inherited linguistic tradition for interpretive experience. Our linguistic tradition "precede(s) and make(s) science possible" in that it is the very condition of interpretation.[15] Gadamer's aim is therefore to examine the condition and nature of interpretive experience by exploring that which constitutes or makes it possible.[16]

While it would be reductionist to view Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as an "offspring of Heidegger's

---

[14] Ibid., p. xvii.

[15] Gadamer's move is analogous to that taken by G. H. Mead in Mind, Self and Society, 1934. Mead's goal was to overcome vulgar behaviorism by demonstrating the constitutive significance of language for social selves. Gadamer's goal is to overcome the exaggerated claims of rationalism and scientism by demonstrating the constitutive significance of our linguistic tradition for interpretation both within and outside of science.

[16] Gadamer actually likens his goal in Truth and Method to Kant's goal in his Critique of Pure Reason. For Gadamer his principal question is, "how is understanding possible?" Truth and Method, 1986, p. xviii. It should be noted that the concepts of understanding and interpretation in philosophical hermeneutics are part of the same experience. Following Heidegger, Gadamer defines understanding as our way of being, as our preconscious way of relating to the world. It is the meaningful way in which we relate to the world. Interpretation is what is provided by understanding in particular situations.

thinking,"[17] it is nevertheless true that the key concepts which form the foundation of Gadamer's analysis of interpretation are appropriated from Heidegger's Being and Time. We shall proceed then with a discussion of several Heideggerian concepts which prove seminal in Gadamer's work.

---

[17] R. Sullivan, in his introduction to his translation of Gadamer's Philosophical Apprenticeships, 1985, p. ix.

Heidegger's Being and Time

In the first few pages of the work that was to win him "world fame in a single stroke,"[18] Heidegger makes several observations that impress upon him the necessity of studying human understanding as a preliminary to studying the meaning of human existence. Being and Time opens with Heidegger's criticism of the Western philosophical tradition for failing to answer what he considers to be the fundamental question of philosophy: the question of the meaning of being.[19] Heidegger points out that the early Greeks had wrestled with the question, but since that time, the question has essentially been "forgotten." By "forgotten" Heidegger means that the question itself has been trivialized to the point of neglect. But it is not simply the case that the question has come to be neglected, but rather, that, there is a sanctioned belief against its even being asked. As Heidegger writes, "... a dogma has been developed which not only declares the question about the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect."[20] As a result, despite the advancements of science and the many technological innovations they have occasioned, the modern

---

[18] This is how Gadamer describes the impact of Being and Time in Philosophical Apprenticeships, 1985, p. 45.

[19] As Heidegger writes, "with the question of the meaning of Being, our investigation comes up against the fundamental question of philosophy." Being and Time, 1962, pp. 49-50.

[20] Heidegger, Being and Time, 1962, p. 21.

world is one within which the meaning of being is obscured. It is Heidegger's intention, therefore, to raise anew the question of the meaning of being.

When Heidegger sets himself to the task of asking himself the question of the meaning of being he experiences difficulty. This difficulty stems from his own preconceptions regarding the relevance of the question itself. It becomes clear to him that these preconceptions are in fact the result of his participation in the very philosophical tradition which he is attacking. The difficulty which he experiences is therefore a function of the Western philosophical tradition's own disregard for the question of the meaning of being, as it now manifests itself in his own effort to raise the question. The difficulty which Heidegger experiences by simply raising the question leads him to conclude that an inquiry into the structure of understanding is a necessary preliminary to his analysis of the meaning of being. Heidegger's experience in the beginning of Being and Time is summarized nicely by Bernstein.

> We are "thrown" into the world as beings who understand and interpret - so if we are to understand what it is to be human beings, we must seek to understand understanding itself, in its rich, full and complex dimensions.[21]

Owing to this realization, what begins for Heidegger as a

---

[21] Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 1983, p. 113.

philosophical inquiry into the question of the meaning of being becomes for him a study into the structure of human understanding. Before discussing Heidegger's conception of understanding it will prove worthwhile to explore the sociological importance of Heidegger's ruminations in the beginning of Being and Time.

The experience which Heidegger describes in the beginning of Being and Time anticipates his analysis of the structure of understanding and foreshadows the conclusions he would reach. The difficulty he experiences when raising the question of the meaning of being leads him to the realization that the meaning which the question has for him is somehow already given to him preconsciously before he actually experiences it. Heidegger concludes that the experience of his own understanding of the question is illustrative of the structure of understanding in general. That is, Heidegger concludes that the structure of understanding consists of preconscious meanings which are the result of one's existence within a particular temporal or historical situation. Heidegger's conceptualization of this insight will be discussed in detail in the pages that follow. We may, however, at this point suggest how this aspect of Heidegger's work may be related to the issue of social structure within sociology, thereby providing a social-theoretical backdrop against which our discussion of Heidegger's analysis of understanding may be read.

It is extremely important to note that Heidegger locates the meaning carried by the Western philosophical tradition within himself. This meaning is not merely within his mind, but part of the structure of his being; part of the way he relates to the world in general. In sociological terms, this means that Heidegger locates the determinate effects of social structure as something that is part of himself, part of his very being, as distinguished from 1) external social facts which constrain him from without, 2) or a conscious or deliberative process which takes place within his mind. He does not, however, embrace a strict structuralist account of human agency, a view that would deny any mediating effect of the agent on social structure. Indeed Heidegger's ability to raise the question of the meaning of being despite Western philosophy's view that the question itself is superfluous attests to this. What Heidegger's analysis succeeds in doing is to specify the structural conditions which are constitutive of understanding and experience. We will discuss this in more detail when we take up Gadamer's appropriation of this Heideggerian insight. We mention it here briefly in the hope that it may give the reader a social-theoretical angle from which to read the discussion of Heidegger which follows.

Heidegger's Conception of Understanding

The first point which should be made regarding Heidegger's conception of understanding is that it is ontological.[22] "Understanding is a mode of being, rather than a mode of knowledge."[23] That is, Heidegger does not view understanding as a cognitive process only, but instead equates understanding with existence itself.

> "Understanding" for Heidegger is, first of all, an "existentiale." That means, simply, that it is a necessary and universal structure of the world of ordinary experience."[24]

To say that understanding is part of the structure of human experience itself is to say that understanding is something which happens naturally simply by virtue of the fact that we exist. This means that all social action contains "an implicit 'understanding' of what the action intends or is all about."[25] Understanding is our way of relating to something without necessarily thinking about it; without having to be consciously aware of the way we are related to that which we are related. In the words of Brockelman

> to exist humanly means to be already related, to necessarily be involved in and with things and

---

[22] Whereas epistemology may be defined as the study of theories of knowledge, ontology may be defined as the study of theories of being or existence.

[23] Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978, p. 148.

[24] Paul T. Brockelman, Time and Self (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p. 56.

[25] Ibid., p. 57.

> others. Putting it another way, there is no such thing as human experience apart from the environment or other people.[26]

There is no such thing as human understanding apart from the environment or other people. This is the meaning of Heidegger's view that understanding is our mode of being, our way of existing in the world. Understanding is therefore constitutive of experience itself.

> Understanding is not one type of activity, to be contrasted with other activities. Understanding is universal and may properly be said to underlie and pervade all activities.[27]

Heidegger uses the term Dasein to denote human existence. Translated, the term means "being-there."[28] He coins the word intentionally to emphasize in each instance of its use the temporal condition of existence. To exist is to be somewhere, and that place where we are is always already understood in terms of where we have been. This is because time is a necessary condition of existence and our experience is structured by it. We don't exist in time so much as we exist temporally. As Brockelman states, "temporality is the very form of doing, the structure of

---

[26] Paul T. Brockelman, Existential Phenomenology and the World of Ordinary Experience (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), p. 54.

[27] Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 1983, pp. 113-114.

[28] Literally, the term means "there-being," but this expression tends to confuse rather than clarify. By expressing Dasein as "being-there" the notion of historical situatedness, which the original term is intended to convey, is preserved.

action."[29]

The temporal, preconscious structuring of understanding and experience is expressed by Heidegger in terms of his concept of the "fore-structure of understanding." The fore-structure of understanding might be thought of as a complex of presuppositions that make understanding possible by "projecting" a general sense of meaning during experience.[30] By "projection," Heidegger means that we experience situations with a general sense of anticipation. The projection or anticipation which is the nature of understanding is therefore also part of our experience. Because we exist temporally, we exist in a way that is always, in a sense, ahead of ourselves. For example, when we go to a party we arrive with preconceptions of what we will experience, expectations of what we will find once there. These expectations are part of the nature of experience itself resulting from the temporal or "fore" structuring of understanding.

The notion that we experience according to the preconscious expectations projected by our fore-structure of

---

[29] Brockelman, Time and Self, 1985, p. 24.

[30] The fore-structure of understanding is actually a threefold notion, consisting of fore-sight, fore-having, and fore-conception. For a detailed discussion of these three aspects of the "fore-structure" and their relationship to understanding see J. Mehta, Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), pp. 70-71.

understanding is known as the "hermeneutic circle."[31] Traditionally, this phrase has been used to denote the "perpetual movement from the particular to the total and back to the particular," whereby meaning is understood.[32] When we pick up a book and begin reading, for example, we already have a sense of what the book means, and it is by way of this general sense that we are able to form our particular interpretation of its meaning. This general sense of meaning is provided by our preconscious relation to the world; that is, by our understanding. One implication of this traditional notion of the hermeneutic circle is that particular parts of a text cannot be understood without reference to a general sense of the meaning of the whole, and, conversely, the meaning of a text as a whole turns on the meaning of its parts.

> This hypothetico-circular movement of understanding the parts in terms of a projected sense of the whole and revising the latter in the light of a closer investigation of the parts, has as its goal the achievement of a unity of sense, that is, an interpretation of the whole in which our detailed knowledge of the parts can be integrated without violence.[33]

In Heidegger the hermeneutic circle takes on new

---

[31] Bauman states that the notion of the hermeneutic circle has been traced back to Friedrich Ast. Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978, pp. 26-28.

[32] Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978, p. 28.

[33] F. R. Dallmayr and T. A. McCarthy, Understanding and Social Inquiry (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p. 289.

significance, owing to his analysis of the preconscious structuring of experience. Rather than being viewed simply as a circle involving the dialectical relation between a particular whole (for example, a text or a life) and its parts, the traditional view of interpretation, the structure of understanding itself becomes viewed as circular in that it depends on the preconscious meaning which its fore-structure projects.

> Understanding is projection, and what it projects are expectations that precede the text. They "jump the gun," as it were, because they anticipate a meaning for the whole before arriving at it. What the interpreter projects in advance is what he understands already- that is, before beginning.[34]

This means that the meaning of that which is experienced cannot be separated from the expectations which are projected in the experience of understanding. In this sense, interpretation is circular in so far as that which makes it possible precedes it. <u>This means that interpretation always has already understood the meaning of its object before it makes that meaning explicit</u>. This is the significance of Heidegger's rendering of the hermeneutic circle. Interpretation is circular in that it cannot proceed without a prior understanding of its object. In Heidegger's words,

> any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is

---

[34] Weinsheimer, <u>Gadamer's Hermeneutics</u>, 1985, p. 166.

to be interpreted.[35]

Heidegger's notion of the fore-structure of understanding enables us to conceptualize the significance of temporal existence. It is important to note, however, that human existence is both concrete and temporal; that is, historical. Our temporal existence is such that we anticipate the future in terms of our understanding of the past. This means that our personal history, our biography, is constitutive of the way we will be related to the world at any given moment. To be already related to the world means that our existence is historically situated. The term simply denotes the fact that we are always immersed in a particular historical context and our experience is structured by the preconscious relations which the context provides. The main implication of this is that history is the condition of experience, even before there is consciousness. Stated differently, understanding already happens before experience, and is therefore ontologically more primary than consciousness. This notion, the notion that meaning exists prior to consciousness, is the central notion of phenomenology.[36]

---

[35] Heidegger, Being and Time, 1962, p. 194.

[36] According to Roy Howard, "...that meaning occurs as a given prior to any conscious action" is the "original thesis of phenomenology." Three Faces of Hermeneutics, p. 120. Interestingly, Heidegger's notion that there exists meaning prior to intentional consciousness is consistent with G. H. Mead's view of meaning. According to Mead, "awareness or consciousness is not necessary to the presence

It should be clear, then, that in Being and Time human understanding is not viewed as an act of consciousness, but as an ontological event, as the way we exist. Defined ontologically as our way of being, understanding takes on new importance: understanding becomes the condition of experience itself. This means that our experience is structured by our existing understanding of the world; what we are is structured by our understanding of what we have been. This is also true of conscious experience and reflection. Conscious experience is always already structured by our understanding, by our preconscious relationship to the world. This insight, for our purpose, is Heidegger's special achievement, for it enables Heidegger to discuss the conditions of consciousness in a way not done within sociology. While it is true that Mead also attempts to ground consciousness in experience, he fails to specify the structure of experience beyond simply saying that such meaning is part of a more general "field" of meaning. By contrast, Heidegger specifies the structure of preconscious

---

of meaning in the process of social experience" Mind, Self and Society, 1934, p. 77. Mead supports this claim by describing how, during the process of social interaction, one person is related to another through an exchange of symbolic gestures the meaning of which is implicitly understood. Mead concludes, "meaning is thus not to be conceived, fundamentally, as a state of consciousness, or as a set of organized relations existing or subsisting mentally outside the field of experience into which they enter; on the contrary, it should be conceived objectively, as having its existence entirely within this realm itself." Mind, Self and Society, 1934, p. 78.

meaning in terms of his concept of the "fore-structure of understanding." This insight proves crucial for Gadamer for it enables him to establish the importance of preconscious meaning for the nature of interpretation.

As Weinsheimer points out, "fundamental to Heidegger's Being and Time is that knowledge of the world cannot be detached from being in the world, nor subject from object."[37] We are born into a specific historical situation that structures our very existence. This means that our experience of time is not only subjective but historical: our experience of time is the experience of history. The importance of this is that concrete temporality or historicity is the structure of understanding, and as such, is constitutive of conscious experience. It is important to emphasize, however, that according to Heidegger the meaning of what we are or have been can never be fully grasped consciously. Traditionally, Western philosophy has conceptualized human existence in terms of its conscious and self-conscious moments. According to Heidegger, however, such moments are actually highly sophisticated modifications of ordinary, practical experiences, which are for the most part tacit and preconscious. Such experiences are simply the way we understand and are related to the world. In Heidegger, to be bound by history means that we are always

---

[37] Joel Weinsheimer, Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 161.

related to the world in a way which is constitutive of our interpretation of that relation, related in a primordial or preconscious way such that our conscious appropriation of experience and meaning is structured by this relation.

Heidegger's view of the concrete-temporal and circular structure of understanding is implicit in Gadamer's view of experience. We experience in terms of our understanding of previous experiences. When we experience something which contradicts a prior understanding the prior understanding is negated. This is what Gadamer is referring to in the passage which we quoted earlier in the first part of this chapter: the preconceptions projected in understanding are subject to contradiction and change in light of new and contrary experience.[38] It is this feature of interpretive experience which has inspired some hermeneuticists to view the hermeneutic circle as a spiral rather than a circle. This is because "spiral" suggests growth and development,

---

[38] The quotation to which I am referring to is the following:

> modern science ... carries through in its methodology what experience has always striven after. Experience is valid only if it is confirmed; hence its dignity depends on its fundamental repeatability. But this means that experience, by its very nature, abolishes its history. This is even true of everyday experience, and how much more for any scientific version of it. Thus it is not just a chance one-sided emphasis of modern scientific theory, but has foundation in fact, that the theory of experience is related teleologically to the truth that is derived from it. (Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 311.)

which is the nature of interpretive experience.

Since Gadamer gets his notion of the circularity involved in all understanding from Heidegger we need to pause and consider more thoroughly Heidegger's break with the traditional notion. Traditional hermeneutics viewed the hermeneutic circle as an obstacle to be overcome. The methodological efforts of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, as we shall see, were designed to overcome what they considered to be the distortive effects of the temporal distance separating subject (historian) and object (for example, a person, historical period, or social group). In terms of the traditional view of the hermeneutic circle, temporal distance appeared as an obstacle because the meaning projected by the subject was alienated from the context within which its object was produced. In traditional hermeneutics, the hermeneutic circle is the basis for the concern over interpretation as a method.[39]

But Heidegger views the hermeneutic circle quite differently. He realizes that without the projective activity of the fore-structure of understanding interpretation would be impossible. This is because interpretation is dependent on the general sense of meaning which the fore-structure of understanding provides. Any

---

[39] From the view of positivism, the hermeneutic circle is a vicious circle because it establishes the impossibility of attaining a completely "objective" interpretive perspective free from the effects of history.

attempt to overcome the hermeneutic circle is therefore mistaken.

> If we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just "sense" it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up.[40]

Heidegger's point is that we must not delude ourselves into thinking that we can escape the circular structure of interpretive experience.

---

[40] Heidegger, Being and Time, 1962, p. 194.

Heidegger and Traditional Hermeneutics

Heidegger's conception of the hermeneutic circle in Being and Time implies a radical critique of the epistemological grounding of reason which typifies the Western rationalist philosophical tradition. The rationalist view of reason holds that one can transcend the hermeneutic circle and obtain an objective interpretive perspective; that is, obtain an interpretive perspective free from presuppositions, or at least free from presuppositions that have not already in some acceptable way been justified. This, however, amounts to a denial of the ontological nature of understanding. Once understanding is defined ontologically as the condition of conscious knowledge, then the hope of ever becoming fully conscious of the conditions and assumptions of knowledge is shattered. This is because, in the ontological view of understanding, interpretation involves the projection of preconceptions in understanding and is therefore always constituted through a pre-conscious understanding of its object. As Dallmayr and McCarthy write,

> there can be no question of the interpreter ridding himself of all preconceptions and prejudgments. This is a logical impossibility- the idea of an interpreter without a language. Nor is it possible to bring to consciousness all-at-once and once-and-for-all one's preconceptions and prejudgments.[41]

The thought of a presuppositionless interpretation is a

---

[41] Dallmayr and McCarthy, Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, p. 289.

logical impossibility because presuppositions or preconceptions are the condition of interpretation; that is, they make interpretation possible.[42] These preconceptions are part of the fore-structure of understanding and stem from our practical relations to the world, which are tied to our historical situation. In light of this the Enlightenment's view of reason, which assumes that reason can transcend its historical condition, must be rejected.

It should also be clear that, in addition to being radical in its critique of rationalism, Heidegger's work is a radical departure from traditional hermeneutics. Before returning to our discussion of Gadamer, it will prove worthwhile to specify precisely what is radical about Heidegger's hermeneutics. We will proceed, then, with a discussion of the positions of two important predecessors of Heidegger the writings of which are generally taken to be representative of traditional hermeneutics.

Mueller-Vollmer writes that Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey are responsible for "transforming hermeneutics from the study and collection of specialized rules of interpretation for the use of theologians and jurists to that of a genuine philosophical discipline (Schleiermacher) and general theory of the social and human

---

[42] We will be able to clarify this point further in our discussion of Gadamer by examining his notions of linguisticality and prejudices.

sciences (Dilthey)."[43] However, while it may be true that modern hermeneutics begins with Schleiermacher, it is nevertheless the case that Schleiermacher remains within the confines of traditional hermeneutics in a number of important respects.[44]

Very much a product of the German romanticist tradition, Schleiermacher (1768-1833)[45] believed that in order to interpret the meaning of a text the interpreter must understand the text as an "expression of its author's individuality."[46] This means that the hermeneuticist must seek to understand the mental life of the author of the text under consideration. By grasping the mental life of the author, Schleiermacher believed one could bridge the temporal distance separating oneself from the text, enabling the subject to recover the meaning originally intended.

---

[43] Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., The Hermeneutics Reader (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. ix.

[44] In this sense Ivan Oliver is correct in placing Schleiermacher within the tradition of the "old" hermeneutic, as distinguished from the "new" hermeneutic of Heidegger and Gadamer. See Ivan Oliver, "The 'old' and the 'new' hermeneutic in sociological theory." The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 34, 1983, pp. 519-553.

[45] Friedrich Schleiermacher was a respected classical philologist and the founder of modern Protestant theology. See Mueller-Vollmer's succinct yet comprehensive discussion of Schleiermacher's importance for the development of hermeneutics in his introduction to The Hermeneutics Reader, 1988. For a discussion of Schleiermacher's project of a universal hermeneutics see Gadamer's Truth and Method, 1986, pp. 162-173.

[46] Mueller-Vollmer, The Hermeneutics Reader, 1988, p. 4.

While Schleiermacher's method aimed to reconstruct the mental life of a text's author, he did not view this as a psychological process, as is often claimed.[47] Schleiermacher believed that "mental facts articulated as speech are not independent of language."[48] This suggests that Schleiermacher rejected the notion of empathy as an interpretive method in favor of a more comprehensive method of historical and linguistical reconstruction. However, while the specifics of Schleiermacher's interpretive method are the subject of debate it is clear that he viewed understanding as a methodological operation to be used to overcome the problems resulting from the temporal (historical) distance separating subject from object.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) lived during the time which saw the rise of social science. Drawing upon the work of Schleiermacher, he sought to formulate a methodological alternative to the positivism of Comte, and thereby expanded the scope of hermeneutics to include the methodological

---

[47] Mueller-Vollmer claims that this is a mistake which Gadamer makes in his interpretation of Schleiermacher. He also claims that Dilthey was responsible for "spreading a one-sided and distorted notion of Schleiermacher's theories." That Dilthey might have misrepresented Schleiermacher is especially unfortunate given that Dilthey's writings on Schleiermacher had "cannonical value and were generally accepted." Mueller-Vollmer's The Hermeneutics Reader, 1988, p. 8. It may very well be the case that Gadamer's alleged misinterpretation of Schleiermacher is the result of the considerable influence which Dilthey had on him.

[48] Mueller-Vollmer's The Hermeneutics Reader, 1988, p. 11.

problems of the human and social sciences. Against Comte, Dilthey argued that because the subject matter of the social sciences differs fundamentally from that of the natural sciences, the two require equally different methodologies. According to Dilthey, the essential difference between the two is that human behavior is lived-through, and is therefore meaningful; whereas natural processes are not. Dilthey conceptualized Verstehen as a method whereby the social scientist could understand the meaning underlying behavior.[49]

The Verstehen method was Dilthey's response to the hermeneutical problem resulting from the temporal or historical distance which separated the subject from its object. Dilthey conceptualized Verstehen as a process whereby one could re-live the experience of an author or historical figure and thereby overcome the gap in meaning resulting from historical difference.[50] Dilthey believed

---

[49] For a discussion of Dilthey's view of hermeneutics see Gadamer's discussion in Truth and Method, 1986, pp. 192-214. For a more sociologically oriented description see Mark J. Goodman, "Type methodology and type myth: Some antecedents of Max Weber's approach." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45 No. 1, 1975, pp.45-58; and J. Turner and L. Beeghley The Emergence of Sociological Theory (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, 1981) pp. 203-204.

[50] Dilthey's method is often construed as a psychological process of reconstruction based on empathy. In his early work, Dilthey's approach is more psychological than in his later work. While this issue lies beyond the scope of this study it is important to point out that the nature of Dilthey's conception of Verstehen is a contested issue in philosophy.

that if this could be done rigorously the historian or social scientist could claim an objective understanding of human behavior on par with the objective explanations attained within natural science.

The traditional view of hermeneutics, exemplified in the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, has two important features. First, it views hermeneutics as a method capable of recovering meaning experienced or intended by a distant historical subject. Second, in traditional hermeneutics the temporal distance resulting from our historical situatedness is viewed as an obstacle to interpretation. As we have seen, historical situatedness refers to the fact that all interpretation and expression is context-specific. The writing of a text takes place within one historical context, and its interpretation may take place within another. The context or historical situatedness of each is then different. Traditional hermeneutics views this "difference," the temporal distance separating the two situations, as an obstacle that must be overcome.

As mentioned earlier in our dicussion of the hermeneutic circle, this view of historical difference is turned on its head by Heidegger. According to Heidegger, it is our presence within a particular historical context which makes interpretation possible in the first place. Only by existing in an historical context do we have the general sensibility which makes interpretation possible. Contrary

to traditional hermeneutics' pejorative view of our historical condition, Heidegger acknowledges its constitutive significance: historical situatedness makes interpretation possible.[51] Heidegger also overturns traditional hermeneutics' methodological view of understanding. As we have seen, by defining understanding ontologically as our preconscious way of relating to the world, Heidegger establishes the primacy or constitutive significance of understanding for experience and consciousness. In Heidegger's view, thematic or methodological approaches to interpretation are derivative modes of interpretation.

It should be clear, then, that Heidegger's work marks a radical divergence from traditional hermeneutics and its "methodological" view of understanding. The traditional view, central in the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, imported into sociology by Weber, and presently maintained by such thinkers as Habermas, defines understanding narrowly as a method to be used to understand texts and social action. The core insight of Heidegger's hermeneutics, elaborated by Gadamer, and drawn upon here as an underlying

---

[51] While it is true that Dilthey grasped the constitutive significance of history for interpretation, he failed to realize its significance for hermeneutics in general. It is my position that Dilthey's methodological view of hermeneutics shows that he viewed the constitutive role of history for interpretation pejoratively in the sense that our historical situatedness gives rise to problems which could only be overcome methodologically.

theme, is the notion that understanding is a practical relation, our way of being in the world. It is, a natural capability exercised routinely by all human beings.

At this point we may restate the intentions of our study. Like Heidegger and Gadamer, we are not concerned with studying the methodological aspects of hermeneutics and interpretation. We are instead concerned with studying the nature of interpretation itself. While it would be perfectly logical for us to focus on the general implications of Heidegger's ontological view of understanding for the philosophy of social science, specifically, for the longstanding debate between objectivist and subjectivist social science, this is not our intention.[52] Our purpose instead is to trace the

---

[52] If our intention were one of methodological critique we might begin by drawing out the significance of Heidegger's insights as they pertain to Comte's view of positive social science and its social function. For example, Comte's view of social science as a privileged exercise in objective pronouncement evaporates into pure folly under the light of Heidegger's insight, which redefines understanding as an ontological rather than epistemological event. According to Heidegger, the world as we know it is not given to us by science or the elite intelligensia. It is instead given to us in meaningful experience, and this meaningfulness mediates subsequent experience through the general sense of understanding which it provides. (While it is true that social science contributes to the content of culture and tradition its contribution is largely indirect and secondary to the normative content rooted in tradition.) The implication of this for the objectivist-subjectivist, or positivist-humanist debate is significant: scientific reasoning must now be viewed as a derivative mode of interpretation, a special case of common sense, the primary mode simply being our experience of culture, tradition, and language in everyday life. Arguments to the contrary notwithstanding,

development of Heidegger's insights in the work of Gadamer. We will continue, therefore, with our discussion of Gadamer, focusing for the most part on his analysis of the nature of interpretation.

---

this does not amount to a rejection of science, but a clearing of the air, so to speak, surrounding the nature and limitations of science.

Gadamer and the Prejudiced Nature of Interpretation

Our discussion of Heidegger focused on his analysis of the nature of understanding. Our discussion of Gadamer will focus on his analysis of the linguistical nature of interpretation. It is important to make clear that while Gadamer examines the linguistic nature of interpretation his discussion does so with an eye towards resolving the problems that have been the concern of traditional hermeneutics. Most of the examples which he uses to express his concepts are examples of text analysis or jurisprudence. We, of course, are interested in the general importance of Gadamer's analysis of interpretation and our discussion of it is therefore selective. Because we will appropriate only those Gadamerian concepts that pertain to the nature of interpretation in general, we may apply them to our study of interpretation as it relates to the social construction of reality and of social action.

It is clear from Heidegger's discussion of the hermeneutic circle in Being and Time that he views interpretation as the manifestation of preconscious understanding. According to Heidegger, our interpretations are actually manifestations of meanings which are already understood. Gadamer, too, views interpretation as the manifestation of preconscious understandings. Interpretation is always an interpretation of some understanding. According to Gadamer, "interpretation is not

something pedagogical for us ... but the act of understanding itself."[53] At the risk of belaboring the point, we may say that understanding is the way we are, while interpretation is an expression of what we are and the way we understand. Understanding and interpretation are therefore, "indissolubly bound up with each other."[54] This is why Heidegger's analysis of the fore-structure of understanding is so important for Gadamer, for every insight which Heidegger attains regarding the nature of understanding is directly relevant to Gadamer's study of the nature of interpretation.

It is important to note at this point the fundamental difference regarding the respective goals of Being and Time and Truth and Method. Heidegger's work is essentially an analysis of human understanding, a task which he views as preliminary to his attempt to actually raise again the question of the meaning of being. It is fair to say that Heidegger's concern over the nature of understanding extends only as far as it assists him in answering the question of the meaning of being. By contrast, Gadamer's concern is much broader. He is concerned with drawing out the implications of Heidegger's disclosure of the fore-structure of understanding for philosophy in general. This was to ultimately lead Gadamer to the conclusion that interpretive

---

[53] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 350.

[54] Ibid., p. 340.

experience is linguistic, and to the conclusion that the scope of hermeneutics, as philosophy, is universal.

As we have seen, the fore-structure of understanding includes preconceptions[55] that are projected to form a general sense of meaning constitutive of interpretive experience. For Gadamer, this Heideggerian concept is a philosophical and hermeneutical watershed. Writes Gadamer, "against the background of this kind of existential analysis .... the problems of a hermeneutics of the human sciences suddenly look very different."[56] Gadamer continues, "the present work is devoted to this new aspect of the hermeneutical problem."

To Gadamer, the significance of Heidegger's concept is that we, being historically situated, project our own preconceptions whenever we interpret something. What is critically important is that Gadamer re-defines preconceptions as <u>prejudices</u>. This raises Heidegger's concept of the fore-structure of understanding to a new level of importance because it asserts that prejudices are

---

[55] Our use of the term "preconceptions" demonstrates the limitations imposed on thought by language. We are using the term to denote the <u>preconscious meaning which is experienced and projected in understanding</u>. In this sense, our use of the term "preconceptions" is partially incorrect, for we are using it to denote meanings which are not "conceptual" at all, but are in fact, preconscious experiences. The term "presupposition" similarly fails to render accurately the preconscious nature of what is being projected in understanding.

[56] Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, 1986, p. 232.

the condition of interpretation. According to Gadamer, "this recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust."[57] Why Heidegger's analysis of the fore-structure of understanding is so important for Gadamer should now be clear. When interpretation is viewed as the expression of particular meanings which have already been understood, interpretation may be viewed as being prejudiced.

In contemporary American society the term "prejudice" has strictly pejorative connotations. It is Gadamer's contention, however, that such connotations amount to a distortion of the traditional meaning of the term. According to Gadamer, prior to the Enlightenment, the term "prejudice" simply meant preliminary judgment.

> It is not until the Enlightenment that the concept of prejudice acquires the negative aspect we are familiar with. Actually 'prejudice' means a judgment that is given before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.[58]

Thus, in Gadamer's view, prejudice does not necessarily mean "false judgment." The term actually means preliminary judgment, a judgment which is tentative and incomplete.

Gadamer believes that it is necessary to "rehabilitate" the concept of prejudice. This is one of the most misunderstood aspects of his work. As Bernstein points out,

---

[57] Ibid., p. 239.

[58] Ibid., p. 240.

it is also one of the boldest.[59] Some commentators, such as Habermas, have misconstrued Gadamer's position and have portrayed him as a political conservative, suggesting that Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice is tantamount to defending tyrannical authority.[60] As we shall see, nothing could be farther from the truth. Gadamer's defense of prejudice must not be construed as an attempt to defend the inhuman and destructive actions which are associated with world views that are typically described as being prejudiced. Instead, Gadamer wants to reintroduce into our tradition an aspect of the term's meaning which has been deformed by the Enlightenment, and by doing so, help us become conscious of the determinate history which operates behind our backs in the form of prejudices. "Prejudice" is simply used by Gadamer to denote the preconscious meanings provided by the fore-structure of understanding. This means that there are true prejudices as well as false prejudices.

Gadamer's notion that there are true and false prejudices is understandable in light of Heidegger's concept of the fore-structure of understanding. Once it is granted that prejudices invariably play a role in interpretation, equating prejudices with false judgments would amount to a

---

[59] Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 1983, p. 127.

[60] See Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method" in Dallmayr and McCarthy, eds. Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, pp. 335-363.

condemnation of the truth status of all interpretation.

> What is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being.[61]

By showing that prejudices are not necessarily false, Gadamer is preserving the possibility of the legitimacy of prejudices, true prejudices, as the ground of interpretation. According to Gadamer, there are true and false prejudices, and the hermeneutical problem we all face is to draw a distinction between the two.

We are now in a position to relate Heidegger's and Gadamer's views of the nature of interpretation to our central research problem. In answer to our first question, 'what is the nature of interpretation?', we may respond that interpretation is by nature prejudiced. What does this mean? It means that interpretation is constituted in understanding through prejudices the truth status of which is assumed during their moment of application. This is the nature of interpretation. What is the significance of this? The significance of the prejudiced nature of interpretation is that, owing to the preconsious application of prejudices, interpretation is always at risk of being unknowingly or preconsciously falsely constituted. Because prejudices are preconsciously applied in understanding false prejudices are not consciously experienced, and therefore are free to

---

[61] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 246.

"operate behind our back," so to speak, and distort our conscious interpretations.

It is critically important at this point to consider our earlier discussion of Gadamer's view of the structure of experience. As we have seen, Gadamer holds that preconceptions projected in understanding are subject to contradiction and negation in light of new and contrary experience. Does not this trivialize his notion of the prejudiced nature of interpretation? If experience has the structure of a corrective which, in a sense, automatically negates false prejudices in light of contradictory experience, this means that the existence of false prejudices is not at all problematic, for their existence is likely to be transitory, their effect insignificant, owing to the corrective structure of experience. In other words, the effect of false prejudices will fail the test of experience and hence be negated. This is a critically important question. What <u>does</u> make the prejudiced nature of interpretation significant and problematic, however, is the fact that prejudices are <u>linguistical</u>. <u>Our use of language carries with it implicit pre-understandings which are typically not experienced during our use of language</u>. Language is somewhat of a shell game in the sense that linguistical concepts are used unconsciously to denote assumed meanings which typically are left unquestioned. The term "freedom," for example, only has meaning in terms of

the assumptions of meaning which people implicitly associate with it. These assumptions of meaning, or prejudices, are both constitutive and representative of our actual relation to the world. This is why the term will mean one thing to an American businessman, and something quite different to a peasant in Nicaragua who spent most of his life under the rule of Somoza. For example, the businessman might associate private property ownership with freedom. By contrast, owing to a history within which private property ownership meant the control of land by a handful of families in Nicaragua, the peasant might easily come to associate state ownership of land with the term freedom. The point we are trying to make is simply that the tacit meanings constitutive of linguistical concepts typically escape conscious experience because our use of language is typically unconscious. It follows that, unless one comes to question the prejudices or preconscious linguistical meanings carried in language, then false prejudices are free to constitute false interpretations that have the appearance of truth. The broader sociological significance of this is explored on the theoretical and topical levels in chapter seven. At this point suffice it to say that, in light of Gadamer's view of the prejudiced nature of interpretation, what sociologists have for years described as the "social construction of reality," may be more accurately described as the "social fabrication of reality"; for Gadamer reveals

prejudices, both true and false ones, as having a constitutive effect on our interpretive experience which is more primary than that provided through conscious thought. Hence it would appear more accurate to describe the social construction of reality as a fabrication, as a weaving of conscious interpretations and social actions structured by true and false prejudices.[62]

This brings us to the question regarding the problematic nature of interpretation. The notion that interpretation is by nature prejudiced is essentially no different than the notion of the hermeneutic circle: both assert that interpretation cannot proceed without a preconception of its object. However, Heidegger emphasizes that if we view the hermeneutic circle as something vicious or problematic we have misunderstood the experience of interpretation from the ground up. Does this mean that we must accept as non-problematic the prejudiced nature of interpretation? Gadamer would say no. According to Gadamer we can acknowledge the facticity of the hermeneutic circle and

---

[62] When we consider the notion that interpretation cannot proceed without a preconception of its "object," the problems surrounding the interpretation of texts or social action become more than <u>methodological</u> problems. Hence, the <u>hermeneutical problem becomes the prejudiced nature of interpretation itself</u>. What this means is that Heidegger and Gadamer have indeed opened up a new dimension of the hermeneutical problem; one which goes beyond a methodological concern over interpretation to include the prejudiced nature of interpretation in general, and its relationship to everyday life, social action, and the social construction or fabrication of reality.

still pursue the potentially problematic implications of the fact that false prejudices are free to distort interpretive experience unknowingly. In Gadamer's view, then, it is not that interpretation is by nature problematic, but rather, that the preconscious application of false prejudices is problematic. Gadamer in fact construes the preconscious effect of false prejudices as a form of domination, and as we shall see, it is his practical concern over the domineering effect of false prejudices which motivates him to explore the possibilities for overcoming them.[63]

The extent to which the prejudices constitutive of interpretive experience across society are actually false is an open question and merits study. The extent to which empirical evidence can be brought to bear on Gadamer's theoretical insights is also worth examining. However, before discussing the possibilities for studying prejudices we must first examine Gadamer's own response to his insights regarding the prejudiced nature of interpretation.

---

[63] It should be noted that it is not Gadamer's intention to embark on an effort to test the truth status of the prejudices constitutive of all interpretations. This of course, would be an impossibility. But aside from the impossibility of such a task, it would be inappropriate to think that all interpretations need to be examined with regard to the truth status of their prejudices. Gadamer clearly views it important to explore the philosophical prejudices which constitute philosophical interpretations, and he does just this throughout Truth and Method. Sociologists would have to examine various types of social interpretations and decide upon the appropriateness of studying them in each case.

CHAPTER IV

LINGUISTICALITY, PREJUDICE AND HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss Gadamer's response to his own conclusions regarding the nature of interpretation. Gadamer's response is a call for the cultivation of "effective-historical consciousness," which is attained through hermeneutical reflection. Gadamer's conception of hermeneutical reflection is complex and must be dealt with carefully and with reference to Gadamer's more general project. Generally, hermeneutical reflection pertains to the process whereby we experience the prejudiced nature of interpretation and as a result attain a more informed and developed interpretation of an object of experience. A subtle yet critically important aspect of the experience of hermeneutical reflection is that it is not merely an act of conscious reflection but is, in essence, a linguistic experience involving critical dialogue. Deliberate hermeneutical reflection occurs when we intentionally maintain that our interpretations are prejudiced and aim to treat our interpretations and those of others sceptically. As we shall see, this is what Gadamer does throughout Truth and Method.[1] It should be emphasized,

[1] By contrast, random hermeneutical reflection occurs when, owing to unexpected circumstances, we consciously experience the prejudiced nature of interpretation and as a

however, that the actual experience of particular prejudices is not a consciously guided event. It is, rather, something that happens to us whether we like it or not, according to our relationship to the world. It does not occur according to what we consciously think our relationship to the world is.

Another important aspect of hermeneutical reflection is that while it may involve becoming aware of certain prejudices, these moments of awareness must be viewed as temporary experiences. That is, it is not as though we transcend certain prejudices once and for all and then proceed to interpret reality afterwards free from their influence. Prejudices are part of the nature of interpretation, and in this sense they make interpretation possible. The actual "overcoming" of prejudices is something which is experienced according to one's historical situation or relation to the world, and as such cannot be consciously intended or scientifically engineered.

In this chapter we will discuss three critically important aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics all of which are closely tied to the notions of prejudice and hermeneutical reflection. The first of these is Gadamer's notion of "linguisticality." This term refers to Gadamer's view that the nature of interpretation is linguistical.

---

result begin questioning what we had typically taken for granted.

Linguisticality also means that prejudices themselves are linguistic, and this clears the way for their specification and empirical study. The second important concept which we will discuss is that of "effective-historical consciousness." This refers to the experience of becoming consciously aware of the meaning-constitutive effects of history which are the condition of experience. It is essentially an attitude or interpretive posture which seeks to remain aware of its own prejudiced nature. The final concept which we will discuss in this chapter is Gadamer's notion of truth, which is unique and controversial. Gadamer's position is that truth is not something which is consciously decided, but something which is experienced. This does not mean that conscious thought has no place in deciding matters of truth; but rather, that our conscious deliberations of truth are simply epiphenomena of a preconscious experience of truth; an experience given in understanding owing to our practical relationship to the world. We will discuss this unusual view of truth after first discussing Gadamer's notions of linguisticality and effective-historical consciousness. Following our discussion of these three important concepts we will define Gadamer's concept of hermeneutical reflection.

As we have seen, the task of traditional hermeneutics was to overcome the problems inhibiting the interpretation of texts and historical periods. It is therefore not

surprising to find Gadamer concerned over the new dimension of the hermeneutical problem which he and Heidegger have uncovered.[2] Indeed, Gadamer's conclusions regarding the prejudiced nature of interpretation lead him to redefine the task of hermeneutics.

> Thus we are able to formulate the central question of a truly historical hermeneutics, epistemologically its fundamental question, namely: where is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from all the countless ones which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?[3]

In order to answer these questions Gadamer must 1) further specify the meaning and nature of prejudices, 2) establish how prejudices are identified, and 3) discuss the "ground" of the legitimacy of prejudices and the process through which legitimate prejudices are distinguished from illegitimate (false) ones. Gadamer completes this threefold task, but as is usually the case in Truth and Method, he does so circuitously and in some respects implicitly. Yet when we analyze the central notions which he develops in the remainder of Truth and Method the answers to these questions are easily discerned. It is in Gadamer's discussion of linguisticality, which occupies the center of Part Three of Truth and Method, that we find an implicit connection between prejudices and preconscious linguistical concepts.

---

[2] This new aspect of the hermeneutical problem is the notion that interpretation cannot proceed without a preconception of its object.

[3] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 246.

This specification of the meaning of prejudices in terms of preconscious linguistical concepts is further supported by an examination of Gadamer's own approach in his analysis of the prejudices of the Enlightenment. The specification of what prejudices are enables us to establish precisely how they are identified; and Gadamer's own discussion of effective-historical consciousness may be taken as an example of how this is done in practice. Finally, in order to answer the question regarding the process through which legitimate prejudices are distinguished from false ones we will examine Gadamer's concept of truth. Once we have discussed these three key aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics - his notions of linguisticality, effective-historical consciousness and truth -, we will be able to specify the nature of hermeneutical reflection and its relationship to the prejudiced nature of interpretation. This chapter, therefore, concentrates on specifying the nature of Gadamer's key concepts; in particular, the concepts of prejudice and hermeneutical reflection. Once this is done we will be able to begin relating Gadamer's hermeneutics to sociology in general. This will be done by first discussing the social-theoretical reception of Gadamer (chapter five), then by relating his analysis of interpretation to the contributions of interpretive sociology (chapter six), and finally by exploring in chapter seven the theoretical and practical possibilities which Gadamer's work presents for

sociology.

The Linguisticality of Understanding

The term "linguisticality" refers to Gadamer's view that the nature of understanding, and hence, the nature of experience itself, is linguistic. This is a strong claim and its meaning is easily misinterpreted. For example, on one level it suggests that there can be no experience which is not linguistic. If this is the meaning of the claim, however, it would have to be rejected, for we have all had experiences which are not linguistic. But this is not the meaning of Gadamer's claim. Gadamer is simply claiming that the nature of understanding is linguistic, and experience is therefore conditioned by language. That is, experience is expressed and mediated through language.

Gadamer's claim is actually twofold. First, as we have stated, he is claiming that the nature of understanding is linguistic. The second claim follows from the first: given that the nature of understanding is linguistic, it follows that the nature of experience must also be linguistic, for as we have seen in chapter three, experience is structured in understanding. We will analyze both of these claims, beginning with the more primary one.

We have seen that Gadamer follows Heidegger in viewing interpretation as the way understanding happens, as the manifestation of understanding in particular situations. It

was this equation that made Heidegger's work so important for him. But Gadamer goes beyond Heidegger by focusing his attention on explicating the linguistic structure of understanding.[4] The key to grasping Gadamer's view that the nature of understanding is linguistic lies in the relationship between "projection" and "application." As we have seen, Heidegger uses the term projection to specify the temporal structure of understanding. The fore-structure of understanding contains preconceptions which are projected in understanding. Gadamer uses the concept of application to demonstrate the practical nature of understanding. Using legal hermeneutics as an example, Gadamer shows how all understanding involves relating or applying the meaning of the object under consideration to one's historical situation or context. Application, as an element of hermeneutical experience (the interpretation of meaning) thus refers to the fact that the meaning of something is in effect the relation it has to one's life activity. In the case of legal hermeneutics, the meaning of a particular law does not actually exist outside of its application to a particular case. The law comes alive, in a sense, when it is applied. This view runs counter to the view of Judge Bork, for

---

[4] It should be noted that even in Being and Time Heidegger was aware of the linguistical nature of experience. It is simply that he did not expound upon this until later works, opting instead to dwell initially upon the existential-historical conditions of the meaning of being.

example, who in his hearing before the Senate committee on his Supreme Court nomination argued for an interpretation of the Constitution outside of historical context.[5] This is the explicit way in which Gadamer uses the term application.

But there is another meaning of application implicit in Gadamer's work which I believe is the key to establishing the legitimacy of his claim that the nature of understanding is linguistic. As we shall see in our discussion of effective-historical consciousness, the key to becoming aware of the effects of history for experience lies in becoming aware of the anterior influences of linguistical concepts. The prejudice of the Enlightenment against the authority of tradition, for example, presents itself as an object of Gadamer's critical analysis in the form of a linguistical concept. The fact that this prejudice reveals itself to Gadamer as a linguistical concept enables him to subject it to critical discourse. The significance of this

---

[5] It is possible to argue that Bork's view that the Constitution should be interpreted in terms of its "original intent" does in fact take into account the historical context of the Constitution. It does not, however, take into account the historical context of those who will be applying it and those who will be affected by its application. It is with respect to this aspect of interpretation, the question of the bearing and relevance of the meaning of an interpretation for its interpreters, that Gadamer rejects the notion that we should attempt to preserve an original intended meaning. It is not merely that such an attempt would create problems (for example, what was the intended original meaning?), but rather, that the very act of interpretation itself makes the meaning of a text one's own. This means that, in Gadamer's view, the meaning of a text is inescapably tied to the historical situation of its interpreter.

lies in the fact that Gadamer's analysis demonstrates by example that prejudices are linguistical in nature; they are implicit in our linguistic expressions and may be challenged in the medium of language.

Why is this important for our analysis of Gadamer's claim that the nature of understanding is linguistic? By defining the prejudices projected in understanding as preconscious linguistical concepts, language becomes part of the nature of understanding. In other words, the projection of preconscious linguistical meanings in understanding means that linguistical concepts are applied in understanding, and this means that language cannot be logically distinguished from understanding. Gadamer writes:

> ... understanding always includes an element of application and thus produces a constant further development in the formation of concepts.[6]

This passage may be interpreted on two distinct levels corresponding to the two meanings we have attributed to application. Explicitly, the development of concepts is furthered as a result of the application of understanding to our relationship to the world. That is, the practical importance which understanding has for our relationship to the world gives rise to new meanings, and the experience of these meanings leads to the further development of our relationship to the world. This "further development" of concepts is the result of the fact that experience will

---

[6] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 364.

negate projected (prior, given) meaning if the latter is contradicted by the former. This is the notion which we discussed above in the context of the relationship between truth and method: "experience is valid, so long as it is not contradicted by new experience."[7] However, owing to our tacit or unconscious use of language the "corrective" structure of experience cannot be said to apply in the case of the implicit application of linguistical concepts in understanding. Unless our unconscious use of language becomes conscious, the corrective structure of experience can have no effect on prejudices constitutive of interpretation. Becoming conscious of our unconscious use of language is therefore a critically important experience.

To summarize, then, we may say that Gadamer uses the concept of application in two senses. 1) To show how all understanding is practical in terms of our relationship to the world, and 2) to illustrate how the structure of understanding is linguistic in that understanding always involves the application of preconscious linguistical meanings. It is in this second sense that the linguistic nature of understanding is demonstrated philosophically.

The demonstration of the linguistic nature of understanding opens up new dimensions in hermeneutics. Specifically, it suggests that experience itself is hermeneutical. This is because Gadamer's discussion of the

---

[7] Ibid., p. 314.

linguistic nature of understanding shows the inter-relatedness of understanding, interpretation, and application, all of which are part of experience itself. What do we mean by this? As we have seen, understanding is our way of being in the world and is hence constitutive of experience; and interpretion is defined by Gadamer as the way understanding happens, the manifestation of understanding in particular situations. This means that interpretation is also part of the nature of experience. We have also seen that understanding and interpretation both involve application. On one level, preconscious meanings are applied implicitly when they are projected in the fore-structure of understanding. On a different level, understanding and interpretation involve explicit application in the sense that the meaning which they provide is always applied practically in terms of one's relation to the world. This means that understanding, interpretation and application are inter-related and inseparable; together they constitute the structure of experience itself. Indeed, it is for this reason that Gadamer claims that the scope of hermeneutics is universal. Hermeneutics is universal because human experience is by nature hermeneutical. That is, experience always involves understanding, interpretation and application. It follows that experience itself is structured linguistically.

We have discussed in philosophical terms the linguistic

nature of understanding, and have touched upon the related notion that the nature of experience is also linguistic. It is nevertheless true that, in some sense, Gadamer's view that the structure of experience is linguistic lacks face validity.[8] At first glance his claim may appear invalid because it may be interpreted to mean that there can be no experiences that are not linguistical. One may raise doubts with regard to this claim by simply thinking of an instance when one experiences something that cannot be put into words. Doesn't such experience contradict the notion that the structure of experience is linguistic? Gadamer disagrees:

> Indeed, language often seems ill-suited to express what we feel. In the face of the overwhelming presence of works of art the task of expressing in words what they say to us seems like an infinite and hopeless undertaking. It seems like a critique of language that our desire and capacity to understand always go beyond any statement that we can make. But this does not affect the fundamental priority of language.

Gadamer continues:

> the critical superiority which we claim over language is not concerned with the conventions of linguistic expression, but with the conventions of meaning that have found their form in language. Thus it says nothing against the essential connection

---

[8] "Face validity" is a basic methodological concept which appears in the literature on social research methods. The concept refers to the validity that a measurement instrument suggests at first glance. If, for example, someone was to suggest measuring one's tendency toward criminal behavior by asking them whether or not they were a Red Sox fan, we would conclude that the measure lacked face validity. Because being a Red Sox fan is not logically related to criminal behavior, we would conclude at first glance that the question was an invalid measure.

between understanding and language.[9]

When Gadamer refers to the "critical superiority which we claim over language," he is referring to our ability to criticize the appropriateness and limitations of words and their usage. It is this criticism which makes Gadamer's position appear untenable. As Gadamer puts it, however, such criticism does not undermine the constitutive significance of language for meaningful experience. This is because such criticism speaks only to the shortcomings of typical meanings that have found their form in language. That is, it is merely criticism of the fact that at times, language appears impoverished by its inability to provide us with words capable of expressing the richness of meaning which is experienced. Such criticism, however, does not undermine the fact that language is not merely a tool or instrument but our mode of expression.[10] In the same section Gadamer explains that this type of criticism in fact "confirms" the connection between understanding and language. This is because "all such criticism which rises above the schematism of our statements in order to understand again finds its expression in the form of language." In other words, language is the medium through which we express the limitations of language. Gadamer

---

[9] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 362.

[10] This is what Gadamer apparently means by the phrase "conventions of linguistic expression."

writes, "Hence language always forestalls any objection to its jurisdication."[11]

As our mode of expression language permeates our experience, and therefore, our very existence. To Gadamer, "language is not a mere tool we use, something we construct with which to communicate and differentiate." Nor is it "just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all." As our mode of expression, language is that through which our world of meaning is constituted.

> ... in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.[12]

Gadamer's linguistic view of experience is not unique. Within sociology, his view may be likened to that of G. H. Mead.[13] Like Gadamer, Mead goes beyond a strictly instrumentalist view of language, such as Marx's view of

---

[11] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, pp. 362-363.

[12] Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, 1977, pp. 62-63.

[13] There are also similarities, as well as differences, between Gadamer's view of language and that of the later Wittgenstein. See Susan Hekman, Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge, 1986, pp. 117-128, for a comparison of the two.

language as practical consciousness.[14] In the compilation of his teachings entitled Mind, Self and Society, Mead claims that sociality is the necessary condition for the emergence of language, and it is the development of language which gave rise to "mind." Because language is the condition of mind, and sociality the condition of language, Mead concludes that the structure of mind is social.

This also means that the structure of mind is linguistic. To Mead, language is the very condition of the emergence of meaningful experience. In Reck's words, "language for Mead is the field from which mind emerges and in which it dwells."[15] It follows that it is language itself which makes possible the development of social selves, or socialized individuals, capable of acting in accordance with what they understand to be the expectations

---

[14] Despite several fundamental differences, the similarities between Mead and Gadamer are surprisingly extensive. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two regards their respective theories of truth. It is notable that Mead was well versed in German Idealism and had studied Kant and Hegel closely. Most interesting is Mead's description in a letter of the impact which Hegel's dialectic had upon him. See David Miller, George Herbert Mead: Self, Language and the World (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1973), p. xiv. In addition to their respective treatments of language, the two are also very similar in their respective views of the phenomenon of play. Gadamer's treatment of play is presented in Part One of Truth and Method, and is also discussed in Philosophical Hermeneutics. Mead's treatment of play appears in Mind, Self and Society.

[15] Andrew J. Reck, ed. Selected Writings, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p. xxviii.

of others.[16] In abstract terms, mind is the liaison between self and society, and that which makes this relation possible is language. In concrete terms, language is the structure of society within us.

Gadamer writes, "a view of language is a view of the world." This is reflected by the fact that certain linguistic expressions are suggestive of the kind of experience typical of the culture or world within which the language is spoken. Like Mead, who views language as a social emergent, Gadamer writes, "... language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it."[17] A language lives through the experience of life which it expresses. As Mead writes, "we have to realize that language is part of our conduct."[18]

Gadamer's explication of the linguistic nature of understanding and experience is his unique contribution to hermeneutics. While the importance of the linguistic nature of existence is noted by Heidegger, it is Gadamer who explicates the significance of linguisticality for the

---

[16] It is interesting to note that this notion of social behavior, which is predicated on shared meaning, is essentially no different than Weber's view of social action as action that takes into account the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.

[17] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 401.

[18] Mead, Mind, Self and Society, 1934, p. 124.

nature of interpretive experience.[19] As Gadamer himself notes, "the linguistic nature of the human experience of the world gives to our analysis of the hermeneutical experience an extended horizon."[20] This extended horizon lies in the specification of prejudices as preconscious linguistical concepts. This means that prejudices are linguistical meanings which are meaningful for us in a preconscious way during their projection in the fore-structure of understanding. Stated differently, prejudices are already understood linguistical meanings which are projected preconsciously in understanding.

The importance of Gadamer's explication of the linguisticality of understanding is that it clears the way for the sociological study of prejudices by enabling us to define prejudices in terms of preconscious linguistical concepts. The sociological significance of this will become clearer after we specify the relationship between prejudices and social structure. But even at this point, we can see that Gadamer's explication of the linguisticality of understanding clearly opens new dimensions of questioning in sociology. For as Gadamer writes, "from the way that words change, we can discover the way that customs and values

---

[19] As David Couzens Hoy points out, "Gadamer's most original contribution to the history of hermeneutics is his linguistic turn." The Critical Circle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), P. 5.

[20] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 405.

change."[21] This means that through the sociological analysis of prejudices or preconscious linguistical concepts sociologists may be able to study culture, societal values, and various aspects of social structure. More important, perhaps, is that it suggests that through the analysis of implicit linguistical concepts we will be able to identify prejudices and study them. As Gadamer writes,

> the language that lives in speech, which takes in all understanding ... is so much bound up with thinking and interpretation that we have too little left if we ignore the actual content of what languages hand down to us and seek to consider only language as form. Unconsciousness of language has not ceased to be the actual modality of speech.[22]

The experience of becoming aware of one's prejudices is therefore tantamount to becoming conscious of one's unconscious use of language. This insight help will clear the way for the identification and study of prejudices, and ultimately, the study of the relationship between prejudices and hermeneutical reflection.

---

[21] Ibid., p. 407.

[22] Ibid., p. 366.

Effective-Historical Consciousness

Through our discussion of Gadamer's explication of the linguisticality of understanding we have been able to specify the meaning of prejudices: prejudices are preconscious linguistical concepts. It is our participation in a linguistic tradition which provides us, through experience, with these preconscious linguistical concepts which structure experience. The key to becoming aware of these prejudices rests on our ability to become conscious of our own linguistic tradition, and, more specifically, our unconscious use of language.[23] This is indeed why Gadamer so meticulously traces the history of the meaning of linguistical concepts before he uses them in his research. To do otherwise would be to submit to the "tyranny" of hidden prejudices; to submit to the determinate effects of preconscious meanings operating behind our back as a result of the linguistical nature of understanding and interpretation. "If thought is to be conscientious," writes Gadamer, "it must become aware of these anterior influences."[24] As Gadamer states in the introduction to Truth and Method

> the following investigation tries to satisfy this

---

[23] Gadamer's conception of tradition is important for he views tradition as linguistical in nature, and therefore the repository of the prejudices which are the condition of our understanding. This aspect of tradition in Gadamer's work is discussed in the pages that follow.

[24] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. xv.

> demand by combining as closely as possible an inquiry into the history of concepts with a factual exposition of its theme.[25]

Gadamer's method of research and exposition is an example of deliberate hermeneutical reflection, which seeks relentlessly to become conscious of the effects of history operating in its own interpretation of that which is its focus; that is, it seeks to become conscious of an otherwise unconscious use of language. While this is the aim of hermeneutical reflection, it is crucially important to emphasize that we can never become completely aware of the full structuring effect of our historical situation. That is, our awareness of the structuring effects of history is always limited. This is because there is no moment when interpretation is not already understood prior to its conscious appropriation. To become conscious of the prejudiced nature of interpretation, therefore, does not involve a transcendental moment within which our prejudices are "overcome." We instead become conscious of the prejudiced nature of interpretation, thereby placing ourselves in an interpretive posture open to the experience of certain, particular prejudices. Hermeneutical consciousness is an attitude which views its own interpretations sceptically, while at the same time refraining from objectivism's false hope of a complete historical transcendence.

---

[25] Ibid., p.xv.

There can be no complete conscious transcendence of history because our historical situation is itself constitutive of understanding and interpretation. This is why the consciousness or awareness of the anterior influences in our understanding and experience can never be complete or exhaustive. Hermeneutical reflection is the act of experiencing the general linguistical-historical condition of one's own mode of expression. It is an experience which is "... the corrective by means of which the thinking reason escapes the prison of language, and is itself constituted linguistically."[26] When we reflect hermeneutically, when we experience the meanings which we typically hold unconsciously, we become conscious of the effects of our prejudices. Gadamer describes this as the process of developing an "effective-historical consciousness." The hermeneutical awareness which Gadamer seeks to maintain throughout Truth and Method is an example of this. Perhaps the clearest example of Gadamer's own effective-historical consciousness is his discussion of the meaning of authority. Because in this discussion Gadamer demonstrates effective-historical consciousness by example, we will analyze it in order to further specify its meaning.

Heidegger's critique of the assumptions of the Enlightenment is replayed, in a sense, on a different level in the work of Gadamer. Whereas Heidegger questions the

---

[26] Ibid., p. 363.

assumptions of the Enlightenment's view of reason, and therefore attacks the Enlightenment on the philosophical level, in Truth and Method Gadamer attacks the Enlightenment on a practical level. Gadamer's critique is aimed at the Enlightenment's unbounded and indiscriminate undermining of authority and tradition.

> Within the Enlightenment, the very concept of authority becomes deformed. On the basis of its concept of reason and freedom, the concept of authority could be seen as diametrically opposed to reason and freedom: to be, in fact, blind obedience. This is the meaning that we know, from the usage of its critics, within modern dictatorships. But this is not the essence of authority.[27]

According to Gadamer the essence of authority rests on recognition and knowledge. It cannot be "bestowed," but instead rests on an act of reason which acknowledges the superior judgment of another in particular situations. This means that legitimate authority depends not on force but on consent. For example, when we yield to the authority of a medical expert we do so because we recognize the superior judgment of the medical expert regarding matters medical.

The legitimate status of authority, of course, does not preclude the existence nor the preponderance of illegitimate authority. Gadamer writes

> the distinction the Enlightenment draws between faith in authority and the use of one's own reason is, in itself, legitimate. If the prestige of authority takes the place of one's own judgment, then authority is in

---

[27] Ibid., p. 248.

fact a source of prejudices.[28]

We may interpret this passage to mean that the authoritative relation requires a responsibility on behalf of the consenting party.[29] This responsibility is one of active interpretation and questioning. That is, if the consenting party simply yields to authority figures because of their prestige, then the consenting party is placing itself in a vulnerable situation by inviting the misuse of authority.

One example of the responsibility required of the consenting party would be the authoritative relationship between a medical doctor and a patient. For example, within the American medical establishment it has been widely believed that once a women has a caesarean birth, she should always have a caesarean birth. Interestingly, there is no statistical or medical evidence supporting this precept, and critics of the medical establishment claim that it exists because it is generally less problematic for a doctor to schedule a "section" then it is for him or her to deal with the unpredictability of vaginal deliveries. In light of this situation, if a pregnant woman who has had a caesarean simply takes the advice of her doctor without questioning the reasons for his or her advice, she is acting irresponsibly, and may pay the price by having unnecessary

---

[28] Ibid., p. 247.

[29] It is, of course, also true that the authoritative relation requires responsibility on behalf of the person or group claiming authority.

major surgery. According to Gadamer, legitimate authority requires vigilance on the part of the consenting party.

Gadamer's position regarding authority is similar to his position toward tradition. The authoritative weight of tradition is not necessarily dogmatic, as the Enlightenment would have us believe. Tradition simply does not linger by virtue of its own inertia. It lives in the experience of those existing in a given historical situation. As Gadamer writes

> ... tradition is constantly an element of freedom and history itself .... it needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, such as is active in all historical change.[30]

When tradition does embody dogmatic beliefs it is not the fault of tradition, but the fault of those existing within the tradition who accept such beliefs irresponsibly and unquestioningly. The importance of Gadamer's view of tradition will become more apparent when we discuss his conception of truth. At this point it is worth noting Gadamer's acknowledgement of what in sociology is termed "agency," the affective and mediating abilities of the individual within social relationships. By viewing tradition as a mutually affective relation between agent and history, and authority as a communicative contract between agents, Gadamer avoids the problems of 1) structuralism, and its deterministic view of social action, and

---

[30] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 250.

2) subjectivism, and its exaggerated view of the transcendental aspects of social action in relation to history. This "middle" position regarding agent and history, or agency and social structure, is also implicit in Heidegger's work, for example, in the opening ruminations of Being and Time which we have already discussed. Indeed, it is arguable that the location of social structure within the existence of the individual in the form of preconsious meanings based on one's relation to the world actually renders sociology's dichotomy between agency and structure obsolete. This is because what is traditionally referred to as social structure, language, meaning, social and economic relations, norms and formal behavioral precepts, are recast as part of the structure of experience itself, not as "external" forces which act over and above the individual. While Heidegger's argument that the meaning of being always appears temporally may appear abstract to some, it actually offers a more accurate and concrete conceptualization of what social action is as compared with sociology's traditional conceptualization of it. According to Heidegger, the structure of social action is most essentially temporal, not economic or political. The significance of the temporal structure of social action has already been explicated in terms of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. This means that the structure of experience, be it a social relation, a labor or economic

relation, or a political relation, is also prejudiced. In each case our experience of the meaning of the relation is already structured by what we have been.

This aspect of social action calls for demystification and rigorous theoretical and empirical analysis. The anterior effects of the temporal structure of experience occur behind us, they precede us and exist as conditions of experience. The meaning and significance of social structure for social action is the structure of social action itself. Social structure does not linger above over us like a cloud or deity, but is instead the very condition of our existence and social action. By contrast, the view that holds "social structure" to consist of forces "over and above" individual experience proceeds from a false premise and can only lead to the obfuscation of reality. Where actual external force exists it exists in the intended and unintended consequences of individual and organized social action, action the structure of which is temporal, and therefore, historical and social. Actual constraint can be and must be traced to the social action of humans and the effects of their social action upon the existence of others. It is arguable that sociology's abstract dichotomy between agent and structure has actually served to conceal the true structure of power and domination, for it acquits the guilty party of responsibility for the actions it commits, by collapsing these actions into a reified construct within

which the guilty becomes anonymous. If there is one clear task of political sociology that has largely been neglected it is to establish the connection between power and domination at the level of individual social action. Only then will those responsible for preserving traditions of domination and exploitation be identified and thereby become the focus of critique. As long as the focus of social critique falls on abstract constructs comprised of anonymous individuals its effect can be little more than ideological.

Gadamer's discussion of authority is important for it demonstrates the nature of hermeneutical reflection and effective-historical consciousness by example. Rather than adhere to the Enlightenment's pejorative view of authority, which remains more or less intact today (and hence, is one of our prejudices), Gadamer sees beyond it and is able to show another aspect of the meaning of authority, which is not apparent in the Enlightenment's view; and this is accomplished by analyzing the Enlightenment's prejudice against authority.

We may use the notion of "horizon" to further specify what Gadamer means by effective-historical consciousness. Gadamer defines horizon as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."[31] In our culture the term horizon is most closely related to the term "perspective." However,

---

[31] Ibid., p. 269.

perspective is often used casually to signify one's opinion, as in the expression "my perspective is ..." But this usage does not do justice to the meaning intended by Gadamer's use of horizon. To have an horizon is to be able to see beyond that which is in front of you; beyond that which is immediately apparent. One acquires an horizon when one is able to see beyond one's own immediate prejudices; beyond the preconscious meaning of something which is projected in understanding. To have a perspective, then, in the sense of having an horizon, is to acquire an interpretive stance that is partly open, a stance which is conscious of its own prejudiced nature. Closed-minded persons, persons stubborn in their beliefs, have only a limited horizon because the prejudiced nature of their interpretive experience is either ignored or denied. To have an horizon is to have become aware of the general historical condition of interpretive experience. When one reads Gadamer on authority and overcomes one's own prejudice against authority one experiences an opening up of an expanded horizon, a more fully developed and realized interpretation of the meaning of authority. The development of a horizon is therefore an accomplishment. When two people engaged in conversation are aware of the prejudiced nature of their respective interpretations, their openness to meaning facilitates what Gadamer terms a "fusion of horizons," a mutually experienced deepening of understanding between them. This means that

the richest interpretive experiences are reserved for those who are able to treat their own interpretations sceptically, for this is the condition of effective-historical consciousness. Its effect is interpretive development and personal growth.

Gadamer's Concept of Truth

> True prejudices can be distinguished from false prejudices by appeal to the commonly shared meanings that constitute the human linguistic community. True prejudices are always self-reflexive, that is, they reveal us to ourselves; they are prejudices that constitute our way of life and our self-understanding. False prejudices do not meet these criteria.[32]

We have specified the meaning of prejudices and have discussed how they may be identified. What remains of our threefold task in this chapter is to establish how true prejudices may be distinguished from false ones. This requires us to examine Gadamer's theory of truth.

It seems perfectly logical to think that once a prejudice is experienced through hermeneutical reflection the next step is to make a conscious judgment regarding its legitimacy. Perhaps one of the most perplexing aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that he views such a step as unnecessary. According to Gadamer, the notion that legitimate and illegitimate prejudices must be distinguished through conscious judgment is mistaken. This is because, in Gadamer's view, the truth status of prejudices is revealed implicitly when the prejudice is itself experienced.

Gadamer's concept of truth is very different from that with which we are accustomed. In our culture we are perhaps most familiar with the correspondence theory of truth, which considers propositions to be true when they correspond to

---

[32] Hekman, Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge, 1986, pp. 114-115.

the facts. It is Gadamer's position that this is only one way in which truth is experienced. It is our lived experience, which takes place within a historical situation, which enables us to experience truth. Truth is therefore grounded in our experience of tradition and culture. In so far as conscious thought or reflective deliberation enters into the experience of answering questions of truth it does so secondarily, as epiphenomena of preconscious understanding. In other words, before we make what we may think is a conscious decision regarding truth, the decision has already been made in understanding. As difficult as this is to accept, it is really the only possible view of truth available once one accepts the notion of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. Just as interpretation cannot proceed without a preconception of its object, neither can a conscious judgment of truth proceed without a preconscious prejudgment of truth.[33] We experience the truth of situations according to the linguistic meanings resident in understanding, not as a result of our conscious reflection upon such experience.

---

[33] We must keep in mind the mediating experience of hermeneutical reflection in this context. Arguably, one could treat his conscious interpretation of truth in a situation sceptically and attempt to become conscious of the constituative effect of prejudices operating in understanding. In this way, Gadamer's view of truth cannot be construed as being deterministic. The central point of his view of truth nevertheless is preserved: we experience truth and this experience is always more than what we are consciously aware of.

Gadamer's view of truth may appear untenable to many sociologists. This is because it runs counter to a rationalist view of truth. Sociologists generally believe that they consciously decide the correct or true interpretation of meaning in situations according to the available data. Moreover, Gadamer's experiential view of truth runs counter to the authority of the intersubjective scientific community. But as we know, rejecting a new theoretical explanation on the basis of an intersubjective scientific consensus does not mean that the new theoretical explanation is false. Indeed, it is the experience, which eventually takes hold, that a new scientific explanation can actually explain more than an old one, which is the structure of scientific revolutions. That a new paradigm may come to enjoy the endorsement of an intersubjective consensus is not itself the result of an intersubjective consensus. It is merely a function of the fact that more and more scientists, in particular those with political power and authority, come over time to experience the limitations of the toppled paradigm, and the superiority of its replacement. Gadamer's hermeneutical or experiential theory of truth simply acknowledges the fact that the criteria for distinguishing true from false, in our own lives, are not, most essentially, rational but experiential.

Let us attempt to clarify Gadamer's position by providing a concrete example of his conception of truth.

During the early years of the Reagan administration, amidst widespread cuts is social programs spending, the Adminstration proposed to serve ketchup in place of vegetables in school lunch programs in an effort to reduce expenditures. The Administration defended the position on the grounds that, scientifically speaking, the status of ketchup could be defended as being that of a vegetable.

On a scientific level, the truth status of the decision turns on whether or not a group of scientists could reach a consensus regarding ketchup's status as a vegetable. And this was easy enough to do. But is it true that ketchup is a vegetable? According to Gadamer's theory of truth, you should ask a member of American society; not a member of a scientific community. We may ask ourselves, then, is it true that ketchup is a vegetable? Would I serve ketchup to my two-year-old daughter if it was my intention to serve to her a vegetable? The truth is, ketchup is a condiment, and I would not serve it as a vegetable. While it is of course the case that my consideration of the question involves conscious thought or deliberation, it is also the case that this deliberation refers not to a theory of knowledge but to my experience of ketchup. Gadamer would assert that my conscious deliberation and the interpretation it provides are in fact epiphenomena of my preconscious experience; epiphenomena of the prejudices in my understanding. The truth regarding ketchup is based on my own experience;

experience which takes place within my culture and tradition. Another way of saying this is that I have a practical understanding of the truth regarding ketchup, which manifests consciously in the judgment that ketchup is a condiment. In a word, I live ketchup as condiment.

As we have been emphasizing all along, experience itself is structured by our temporal and historical situation. This means that experience is structured by the way we are related to the world, and is therefore social. This means that the answer to Gadamer's question 'where is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices?' is ... the shared social meanings carried through tradition and experienced in everyday life. More specifically, the ground of truth is our existence within and relationship to our linguistic community and tradition.

> The criteria by which we distinguish true from false are found not in 'method' but in the common understandings of the linguistic community and in our critical examination of and openness to tradition.[34]

This description of Gadamer's conception of truth mentions its two most important features. The first concerns the grounding of truth in our experience of the linguistic community and tradition. This relation does not involve a conscious or explicit appeal as does the relation between a scientist and the intersubjective scientific community, and

---

[34] Hekman, Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge, 1986, p. 117.

thus does not involve consensus. Our experience of truth instead contains an implicit appeal to the shared meanings of our tradition. Truth is grounded in an implicit appeal in the sense that prejudices resident in our linguistic tradition provide implicit criteria in the form of prejudices that are constitutive of experience. It is an appeal in the sense that these meanings are the structure of our experience and operate as prejudices in understanding.

The second aspect referred to by Hekman in the passage quoted above, however, is a little more involved. To say that hermeneutical reflection contains an implicit appeal to shared social meaning is to say that hermeneutical reflection has the structure of a question.[35] This is because the meaning which structures experience is always contrasted with the actual meaning which is experienced. This returns us again to that all-important and recurring theme in Truth and Method: experience is valid so long as it is not contradicted by new experience. If the preconscious meaning is contradicted in hermeneutical experience, then it will be negated. This, once again, is perhaps the most important feature of Gadamer's conception of the nature of experience. It means that the very experience of contrasting a prejudice with interpretations experienced in a dialogue has the impicit structure of a question, for the

---

[35] Gadamer writes that hermeneutical reflection automatically involves a "questioning of things." Truth and Method, 1986, p. 238.

experience places a demand on the meaning of the prejudice in so far as the prejudice is now being experienced openly in the light of different experiences of meaning. Hence, in dialogue false prejudices reveal themselves as such when they are negated by contradictory experience. This is what is meant by Gadamer's notion that false prejudices do not amount to anything when they are "worked out"; they are contradicted in light of subsequent experience or a conscious recollection of an antecedent experience.

It would seem that the key to overcoming false prejudices, and this is indeed a matter of great importance to Gadamer, as it should be to sociologists, does not lie in establishing abstract or objective criteria by which prejudices may be judged consciously. The key instead simply involves bringing prejudices into conscious awareness; that is, identifying preconscious linguistical concepts which are typically assumed and bringing them into dialogue. This is all we can really do to facilitate the overcoming of false prejudices, for the decision regarding the truth status of prejudices will already be implicit in the experience of that which has been brought into discussion. It is therefore the absence of critical discourse on the meaning of prejudices which is a social problem; not the notion that we are at a loss as to how we might resolve differences of opinion. It is not as if one can claim a judgmental position regarding the truth status

of one's interpretation, for conscious judgments are provided by preconscious experience in understanding. This means that the emancipatory interest of reason has been fulfilled once we are able to experience the latent meaning of a prejudice, for the truth regarding the prejudice which is experienced will be given in the experience itself. This is why Gadamer views our linguistic tradition as the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices. Tradition forms the ground of truth not by providing us with dogmatic, absolute, truths; but by supplying us, if you will, with the linguistical prejudices which constitute our experiences of understanding and interpretation, thereby enabling us to experience the truth when it happens to us.

What is Hermeneutical Reflection?

Gadamer does not provide a specific definition of hermeneutical reflection. Nevertheless, a definition of it may be discerned from his more general discussion of the nature of interpretation. First, hermeneutical reflection originates in preconscious experience and has the structure of an experience. This means that hermeneutical reflection is prompted by an experience of understanding, an experience involving much more than simply conscious thought. This experience often times is an unsettling feeling, such as a feeling of uncertainty or a feeling that the meaning of something experienced does not ring true. How does the unsettling feeling which gives rise to hermeneutical reflection differ from Mead's problematic situation? As we discussed earlier, Mead's notion of problematic situations assumes the presence of a goal or deliberate behavioral end the attainment of which has been frustrated. Gadamer's condition for hermeneutical reflection does not depend on the frustration of goal attainment, but rather, on the frustration of understanding. Understanding cannot be reduced to a purposive goal or end, for it is the condition of our existence.

The second important feature of hermeneutical reflection is that it gives rise to a linguistic expression which has the structure of a question. This does not necessarily mean that hermeneutical reflection gives rise to a question in

the strict sense of the word; but to an expression of meaning the nature of which contrasts with a previous experience of meaning in such a way as to call the original meaning into question.[36] Hermeneutical reflection is therefore a discursive experience involving either an implicit or explicit questioning of the meaning of something in terms of pre-understandings or prejudices.

Thus defined, hermeneutical reflection would appear to take prejudices as its focus only once these prejudices have given rise to an unsettling interpretive experience. Under what situations might prejudices give rise to an unsettling interpretive experience? Only when they are the intended focus of discursive experience or otherwise become the focus of discourse as a result of unexpected circumstances or happenstance. The former may be termed <u>deliberate hermeneutical reflection</u>, the latter <u>spontaneous hermeneutical reflection</u>. An example of spontaneous hermeneutical reflection would be a moment in which a prejudice is revealed on the basis of an unplanned juxtapositioning of meanings which gives rise to an embarrassing or unsettling interpretive experience. For example, a person finds oneself in conversation with a feminist and upon using a male pronoun to describe God is revealed by the feminist for having a prejudiced

---

[36] Recall Gadamer's notion of the nature of experience and how subsequent experienes may have the effect of negating prejudices.

understanding which assumes that God is male. In this instance the focus of the discourse might come to fall on the prejudice which has been revealed, and the non-feminist might be led back through discourse to a conscious examination of the prejudice itself. Such revelations are part of life itself for the truth about ourselves is often revealed in those moments which otherwise might be considered trivial or non-consequential. It should be clear, then, that hermeneutical reflection is a common experience, it is not a "privileged" experience reserved for intellectuals, scientists or philosophers. It may occur naturally according to the flow of common experience. It may also, however, be prompted by the conscious acknowledgment of the prejudiced nature of interpretation, an acknowledgement which gives rise to an intentional reflection on one's or another's prejudices. Such instances would be examples of deliberate hermeneutical reflection. The paradigm case of deliberate hermeneutical reflection is provided by Gadamer himself in his analysis of authority and prejudice.

Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of our definition of hermeneutical reflection is its lack of specificity and detail. However, to specify its meaning any further at this time would be impossible for Gadamer's treatment of hermeneutical reflection is not systematic, and further specificity without theoretical or empirical direction would

amount to little more than speculation. We have no choice other than to begin with what we can reasonably accept to be true regarding the phenomenon, and direct our efforts at researching it under the assumption that its meaning will become clearer in due time. We will outline how sociologists might begin to study hermeneutical reflection in chapter seven.

CHAPTER V

THE SOCIAL-THEORETICAL RECEPTION OF GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

In this chapter we will focus on the critical social-theoretical reception of Gadamer's hermeneutics by discussing the writings of Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas. These leading social theorists are unique in that they have both taken Gadamer to task on a number of his conceptualizations. While Giddens' analysis of Gadamer is somewhat cursory, it is nevertheless very important for it is literally the only substantive discussion of Gadamer penned by a non-Continental social theorist. By contrast, in Germany Gadamer's social-theoretical significance has received considerable amount of attention. Habermas has by far been the most vocal critic of Gadamer. Habermas has written the definitive social-theoretical review of Truth and Method, and has played an important part in legitimizing the study of Gadamer within social theory.

Habermas, and to a lesser extent Giddens, must both be credited for introducing Gadamer's hermeneutics to a number of social theorists, and in this sense, their respective writings on Gadamer must be viewed as important contributions to the effort of establishing the sociological significance of his work. However, while Giddens' and

Habermas' contributions to the social-theoretical reception of Gadamer are important, it is nevertheless the case that both misunderstand several of Gadamer's key points and consequently fail to grasp the full significance of his work for social theory and sociology.

The aim of our discussion in this chapter is to explore the criticism that Gadamer has received from these two leading social theorists. By exploring such criticisms we will be better able to assess the potential importance of Gadamer's hermeneutical insights for social theory and sociology.

Giddens Discovers Hermeneutics

As we discussed in the introduction to this work, Continental hermeneutics has generally been ignored in the English-speaking world. Among contemporary Anglo social theorists only Anthony Giddens has commented on Gadamer's hermeneutics. Nowhere in the work of the more widely published American social theorists, such as Jeffrey Alexander, George Ritzer, or Jonathan Turner will you find any mention of Gadamer; or anything more than a passing mention of hermeneutics. When such theorists do mention hermeneutics, they typically do so in reference to Weber's method of Verstehen, reciting the standard social-theoretical interpretation of Dilthey while ignoring the contemporary developments within hermeneutics.[1]

In addition to offering Anglo-American social theorists an introduction to Gadamer's general ideas, Giddens has also speculated on the importance of Gadamer's work for social theory, particularly with regard to the implications of the

---

[1] The social-theoretical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics has yet to be explored by American social theorists. Jeffrey Alexander makes no mention of Gadamer in his four volume effort Theoretical Logic in Sociology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Jonathan Turner also ignores Gadamer in The Structure of Sociological Theory (Chicago: Dorsey, 1986). The same is true of George Ritzer Sociological Theory (New York: Knopf, 1983). When these theorists do mention hermeneutics it is in reference to the methodological development of Max Weber. I am unaware of any American social-theoretical effort to explore the significance of Gadamer for sociology; Anthony Giddens' attempt to do so is the only which I know of in Anglo social theory.

ontological status of understanding for the agency-structure problematic. Giddens has also suggested that sociologists begin studying the "tacit" understandings which structure experience. Unfortunately, he has not discussed in any specific sense how this might be accomplished. Perhaps the most significant implication of Giddens' discussion of Gadamer is that it is an indication of the fact that Anglo-American social theorists are at least beginning to take note of the social theoretical and sociological relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Giddens' discovery of hermeneutics came in the wake of his encounter with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Peter Winch. These figures fall outside of the classical hermeneutic tradition but, given their concern over the centrality of language and interpretation, have been viewed by some to represent an analytical version of hermeneutics.[2] In his New Rules of Sociological Method Giddens turns his attention to Gadamer after examining the work of Wittgenstein and Winch, and it would appear safe to say that his interest in

---

[2] Roy Howard, for example, views the work of Wittgenstein and Winch as one strain of hermeneutics, the other two being the psychoanalytic hermeneutics of Habermas and Apel, and the ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer. See Three Faces of Hermeneutics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). We will not discuss the work of Wittgenstein or Winch in this work for their contributions do not bear directly on Gadamer's hermeneutics. It may be noted that Habermas has used Gadamer's hermeneutics to indicate shortcomings in Wittgenstein's view of language. See J. Habermas, "A review of Truth and Method" in F. Dallmayr and T. McCarthy, eds., Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, pp. 335-363.

Gadamer grew out of his initial concern over these figures.[3]

As the following quotation demonstrates, Giddens sees important theoretical convergence around the notion of the "social foundation" of self-consciousness and interpretation, and this observation has led him into new theoretical areas, areas which include the works of Heidegger and Gadamer.

> Talcott Parsons has argued that the most significant convergent idea in modern social thought concerns the 'internalization of values' as independently arrived at by Durkheim and Freud; I think a better case can be made for the notion of the social (and linguistic) foundation of reflexivity such as was independently arrived at, from widely varying perspectives, by Mead, Wittgenstein and Heidegger- and, following the latter, Gadamer.[4]

The great importance which Giddens attributes to the notion that the foundation of reflexivity[5] is social stems from the realization that the meaning experienced by social agents must also be part of the structure of social action itself. This realization evidences an important theoretical development in Giddens' work for it eventually leads him to construct a theory of social reality which takes at its center the mediating or interpretive activity of social agents. This development brings Giddens into contact with

---

[3] Anthony Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method (New York: Basic, 1976).

[4] Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 19.

[5] Giddens uses the term "reflexivity" to denote the phenomenon of "self-awareness." See New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 18.

the work of the the later Wittgenstein, Peter Winch, Alfred Schutz, Harold Garfinkel and Continental hermeneutics. The primary focus of our immediate discussion falls on Giddens' analysis of Gadamer.

Following Heidegger, Giddens takes as his point of departure the notion that understanding is ontological. But unlike Heidegger, who is exclusively concerned with establishing the importance of the ontological nature of understanding for the question of the meaning of being, Giddens attempts to establish its importance for the relationship between meaning and social action. Giddens' discussion of the social theoretical implications of Heidegger's ontological view of understanding undermines traditional sociology's abstract distinction between individual and social structure. As Giddens states in the introduction to New Rules of Sociological Method, "the problem of the relation between the constitution of society by actors, and the constitution of those actors by the society of which they are members, has nothing to do with a differentiation between micro- and macro-sociology; it cuts across any such division."[6] In a later work, Giddens argues that "structured properties of social activity ... are constantly recreated out of the very resources which

---

[6] Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 22.

constitute them."[7] Hence, in Giddens' view, social structure is not an entity over and above individual human existence, it is instead a conceptualization which simply denotes the extension of "social practices" across "time and space."[8] This view evidences the influence of the early Heidegger on Giddens, particularly with respect to Heidegger's thoughts regarding the temporality of being.[9]

The central importance which the hermeneutical notion of the ontological nature of understanding has had for Giddens' theoretical development is evidenced by the emphasis which he now places on "knowledgeability,"[10] a term which he uses to signify the mediating ability of social agents. To Giddens, actors are not cultural zombies. They are instead knowledgeable agents who act according to their interpretation of reality. This knowledgeability, cautions Giddens, is not limited to conscious knowledge, for it includes tacit understandings which form the basis of our

---

[7] Anthony Giddens, The Constitution of Society (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. xxiii.

[8] Anthony Giddens, Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) p. 8.

[9] For his discussion of Heidegger see Anthony Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 3-4; and also, his introduction to The Constitution of Society, 1984.

[10] As we have seen, Giddens uses the term to denote the mediating and interpretive capabilities of social agents. The term appears in both Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory, 1982 and The Constitution of Society, 1984.

practical relation to the world. In The Constitution of Society Giddens draws a distinction between two levels of knowledgeability, 1) discursive consciousness and 2) practical consciousness. Discursive consciousness refers to "what actors are able to say, or give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action." By contrast, practical consciousness refers to "what actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively."[11] Giddens' view of practical consciousness is thus his version of Heidegger's "understanding." It is not adequately clear, however, why Giddens feels that practical consciousness cannot be expressed discursively. This claim may be viewed as an attempt on Giddens' part to acknowledge the circular nature of interpretation; by emphasizing the practical-relational and preconscious aspects of understanding Giddens remains consistent with the philosophical-hermeneutical notion of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. However, it appears problematic for Giddens to claim that practical consciousness cannot be experienced discursively, for this is inconsistent with Gadamer's notion of hermeneutical reflection. While it is true that practical consciousness can never be fully manifest in consciousness, and therefore

---

[11] Giddens, The Constitution of Society, 1986, pp. 374-375.

can never be fully articulated discursively, it is also true that we can become aware of some of our practical preconscious understandings (prejudices) through hermeneutical reflection. Despite this problem, it is nevertheless clear that Giddens is headed in the right direction by attempting to account for the open-ended, dialectical construction of social reality by specifying the nature of knowledgeability in ontological terms.

Giddens' increased concern over knowledgeability became apparent with the publication of his New Rules of Sociological Method. The work is a survey of recent developments in social theory and hermeneutics, all of which suggest revolutionary changes in the conceptualization of sociological methods. These developments are tied to one key insight, that being the realization that understanding is an ontological phenomenon the experience of which is not reserved merely for social scientists. This of course is one of Heidegger's key insights, and that which Gadamer draws upon to develop his own hermeneutics. As the following quote illustrates, it appears that Giddens has grasped one of the main points of Gadamer's hermeneutics, if only in the most general of terms.

> In the tradition of the Geisteswissenschaften in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, verstehen was regarded above all as a method, a means of studying man, and as such depended upon the the 'reliving' or 're-enactment' of the experiences of others .... But what these writers (Dilthey and Weber) called 'understanding' is not merely a method for making sense of what others do, nor does it require an empathic

> grasp of their consciousness in some mysterious or obscure fashion: it is the very ontological condition of human life in society as such.[12]

According to Giddens, the social theoretical significance of the ontological status of understanding is that "self-understanding is connected integrally to the understanding of others."[13] This means that the construction of meaning in the minds of individuals is socially constituted. This is why Giddens comes to place great importance in what he terms "reflexivity" or "self-awareness." However, while it may be true that Giddens grasps the general distinction between understanding (as the ontological condition of being) and method (as a thematized derivative of quotidian understanding) it is apparent from the rest of his discussion of Gadamer that he fails to grasp its full significance. This may be inferred from analyzing Giddens' contradictory position regarding the universality of hermeneutics. His own comments, such as the one quoted at length above, suggest that his would be a position which supports the notion of the universality of hermeneutics, for it is precisely the ontological status of understanding which makes hermeneutics universal. Nevertheless, Giddens' commentary on Gadamer is sprinkled with comments which suggest just the opposite. For example, Giddens mistakenly

---

[12] Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 19, author's emphasis.

[13] Ibid., p. 19.

interprets hermeneutics' claim to universality to mean that its proponents believe that the study of social activity can be "purely hermeneutic."[14] As we have seen, however, the universality of hermeneutics simply refers to the fact that experience itself is hermeneutical in that it involves understanding, interpretation and application. In this sense, all experience, and therefore, all scientific experience, is hermeneutical. This, however, does not preclude the possibility of conducting scientific research into the nature of social reality, research that would be constituted in hermeneutical experience, but would not be "purely hermeneutic." Can experience ever be "purely hermeneutic?" What does this mean? According to Gadamer experience is always hermeneutical but this does not mean that experience is purely or exclusively hermeneutical. While hermeneutical, experience is always influenced by the economic and social relations constitutive of a particular historical situation, and may include the application of a conscious interpretation of the meaning of the situation to social action. This means that while experience is by nature hermeneutical, it can in no meaningful sense of the word be reduced to being "purely hermeneutic." In all fairness to Giddens, when considered in terms of the rest of his discussion his use of "purely hermeneutic" would simply seem to denote the idea of a type of research free of any

---

[14] Ibid., p. 58.

methodological or theoretical dependencies. However, while it is true that Gadamer rejects methodological approaches in so far as they require one to claim a false detachment from one's linguistical tradition it would be absurd to suggest that a hermeneutically informed analysis of society would be unable or unwilling to draw on various theoretical conceptualizations.

Giddens' assertion that Gadamer would choose to reduce the study of social activity to a purely hermeneutical approach is understandable in light of several other assertions which indicate that he does not understand the full meaning of the ontological status of understanding. Rather than taking the notion of the universality of hermeneutics as an expression of the fact that human experience is itself hermeneutical, Giddens mistakenly interprets the universality of hermeneutics to mean something quite different. Giddens writes "the 'universality of hermeneutics' could only be sustained if man were wholly transparent to himself, in a world of perfect Hegelian rationality."[15] This indicates that Giddens seriously misunderstands Gadamer's conception of the universality of hermeneutics, for as we have seen, Gadamer is adamant regarding the historical-linguistic boundedness of understanding. Not only can we never become "wholly transparent" to ourselves, a claim Giddens attributes to

---

[15] Ibid., p. 58.

Gadamer, but the very experience of reality involves the projection of prejudices which themselves can never be made fully explicit. The universality of hermeneutics, therefore, does not mean that we are evolving to a point where everything will be understood, but simply, that we are interpretive beings who exist in historical situations which are constitutive of interpretive experience.

To make matters worse Giddens likens hermeneutics' claim to universality to positivism's claim to a privileged position regarding the explanation of human conduct! According to Giddens, hermeneutics and positivism "each aspire(s) to cover the whole range of human behaviour, to accomodate it to its particular logical scheme."[16] This evidences the fact that, despite Giddens' general acknowledgement of the ontological status of understanding, he mistakenly views hermeneutics as a methodological program the purpose of which is to serve or, in the most extreme case, subsume, social science. His view of hermeneutics is a top-down view; a view which sees hermeneutics as a methodological discipline that intends to climb above all other social scientific disciplines and rule from the top-down. Quite the opposite is the case. Gadamer's hermeneutics is not a methodology, it concerns the nature of interpretive experience, and can have no disciplinary ambitions for it pertains to an aspect of all disciplines,

---

[16] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

that aspect being interpretive experience itself. As part of experience itself interpretation is constitutive of social science research. In this sense its importance is primary. Hermeneutics is universal by virtue of the nature of experience; not by virtue of an experience of nature which intends to dominate related fields and disciplines.

Giddens' failure to grasp the insight that experience itself is hermeneutical, the central insight of Gadamer's hermeneutics, raises questions regarding the quality of his reading of Gadamer. It is also a clear indication of the fact that, despite his general comments, Giddens has not yet grasped the full meaning of the ontological status of understanding. If it were the case that Giddens fully grasped the significance of the ontological status of understanding he could hardly arrive at the criticisms of Gadamer which he has published. As for his reading of Gadamer, his commentary in New Rules of Sociological Method reads more like a paraphrasing of Habermas' critique of Gadamer than it does an original analysis of the primary work. While Giddens does translate and cite several passages from the original German edition of Truth and Method (Warheit und Methode), his substantive criticisms are generally supported by singular references to secondary literature, rather than through a sustained theoretical analysis of Gadamer's own argument. This may partly explain the blatent contradiction in Giddens' reading of Gadamer

regarding the universality of hermeneutics. Giddens criticizes the "hermeneutic philosophers" for allegedly believing that "all human action has to be understood,"[17] and at the same time advocates an ontological view of understanding. The ontological view of understanding is one which views understanding as part of all human experience. The implication of this is not that all human action "has to be understood," but rather, that all human action is already understood. It is understood preconsciously by virtue of the hermeneutical nature of experience itself.

Another interesting aspect of Giddens' interpretation of Gadamer is that Giddens appears to be criticizing the fact that hermeneutical analysis is inescapably historical. Giddens writes

> a purely hermeneutic account of the social sciences places out of court the possibility- which is actually a necessity- of analysing social conduct in terms which go beyond those of actors situated in particular traditions, and which are of explanatory significance in relation to them.[18]

The problem with this criticism is that it belittles hermeneutics for its inability to explain social action in terms other than those indigenous to the tradition within which certain social action has taken place. In other words, Giddens is attacking the historical sensitivity and cultural accountability of a methodological hermeneutics,

---

[17] Ibid., p. 59.

[18] Ibid., p. 62.

and criticizes hermeneutics for its rejection of trans-historical nomological propositions. Giddens' error in this case is not that he has misinterpreted another aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics, but rather, that, despite his ontological view of understanding, he adheres to a false view of consciousness which assumes that one can actually construct interpretations of reality which are free of the historical effect of one's situation. This view of consciousness, of course, is rejected by Gadamer, for he takes such a view to be mythical, since all propositions originate and reside within a linguistic tradition. But this does not place out of court the possibility of generating nomological propositions, only the claim that they are trans-historical. What makes such general observations true when they indeed are true is not that they are trans-historical and representative of a universal causal truth; but rather, that they pertain to different historical situations which overlap in such a way as to render one causal interpretation applicable in both cases.

Another interesting aspect of Giddens' critique of Gadamer is that he rejects Gadamer's theory of truth, but unfortunately fails to provide any reasons for his rejection of it. Giddens writes

> Gadamer argues that hermeneutics is 'a discipline which guarantees truth.' But this means that truth inheres in being, the fundamental error of existentialist phenomenology, and one not rescued

by Gadamer's appeal to dialectics.[19]

While it may be the case that Gadamer exaggerates when he states that hermeneutics guarantees truth, this by itself does not undermine the basis of his experiential theory of truth. As we have seen, the main point of Gadamer's theory of truth is that truth is not decided, but rather, experienced.[20] It is unclear exactly what Giddens means by the statment "truth inheres in being," but it seems clear that he is failing to entertain the full meaning of Gadamer's theory of truth, and is content to reject it out of hand without providing any specific reasons. This is not the only instance in which Giddens criticizes Gadamer by way of a passing, unsupported comment. For example, in Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory Giddens supports the "modified realist theory of science" of Hesse and Bhaskar and praises them for not "succumbing to the historicism of Gadamer."[21] Meanwhile, nowhere in this volume, nor in any of the other three volumes of Giddens cited in this chapter, does he discuss the relationship between Gadamer and

---

[19] Ibid., p. 62.

[20] Another way of saying this is that when truth is consciously decided it is because it has already been experienced in understanding.

[21] Giddens, Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory, 1982, p. 14.

historicism.[22]

The final point regarding Giddens' critique of Gadamer concerns the relationship between hermeneutics and method. Giddens fails accurately to portray Gadamer's critique of method, and accordingly misconstrues its importance for sociology.[23] Gadamer's complaint against method has two main points. First, by arguing that history or our linguistical tradition is constitutive of interpretive experience, Gadamer claims that methodological experience is a conceptual or thematic derivative of quotidian understanding. This point is not problematic for Giddens, as he himself has argued a similar position. Second, owing to the typical methodological requirement of denying one's "subjectivity" or biographical understanding in order to attain an "objective" interpretive perspective, Gadamer indicts method for forcing the researcher into a false belief regarding one's actual historical situation. The significance of this, according to Gadamer, is that deliberately ignoring one's historicity while experiencing the meaning of something (while doing research) can only amount to a self-alienating experience. This is because the quality of the interpretation experienced will turn in part

---

[22] Such a discussion would prove worthwhile as it would bear considerably on the issue of the value of nomological propositions.

[23] See Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 64.

on the preconscious understanding of the researcher. If this preconscious understanding is consciously denied in favor of some other interpretive criteria, the experience of meaning will be confused and alienated. Stated differently, Gadamer rejects method because it typically requires a false separation between oneself and the all pervasive linguistic tradition, a separation which can only confound what passes for truth.

Disappointingly, Giddens ignores this second point of Gadamer's critique of method. Whereas it is Gadamer's aim to demonstrate the narrowness and alienation of method as a concept, Giddens tries to widen the definition of method to include common practices such as those described by ethnomethodology. While it is true that Gadamer fails to provide a precise definition of method in Truth and Method, it is nevertheless clear that he uses the term to refer to a "controlled alienation" guided by prescribed conceptual or thematic guidelines. Giddens, on the other hand, uses the term "method" very generally to refer to consistencies of social interpretation. From a Gadamerian perspective, the distinction between the former and the latter is critical. To construe the common social practices of everyday life as "methodological" is therefore problematic, for such practices do not assert a false separation between conscious experience and one's linguistic tradition. However, by failing to focus specifically on the content of Gadamer's

critique of method Giddens incorrectly collapses what is otherwise a critical distinction between common social practices and "method."

For all of its shortcomings, however, there are some bright moments in Giddens' discussion of Gadamer, and it is to these that we now turn our attention. First, despite the fact that Giddens fails to grasp the meaning of the universality of hermeneutics, he does see an application of hermeneutics within sociology beyond text interpretation. This application is conceptualized on two levels in Giddens' work. On a theoretical level Giddens attempts to develop a "hermeneutically informed social theory."[24] That Giddens has afforded central importance to knowledgeability in his theory of structuration indicates that he has already partially realized this goal. In a more general theoretical sense Giddens' concept of the "double hermeneutic" is further evidence of the impact which hermeneutics has had on his theoretical development. The "double hermeneutic" refers to two aspects of the ontological nature of understanding. First, it refers to the fact that the subject matter of sociology, meaningful social action, is interpreted twice; once by social actors, and again by the sociologist studying them. The double hermeneutic thus refers to the fact that sociologists aim to interpret

---

[24] Giddens, Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory, 1982, p. 5.

meanings that have themselves already been interpreted. Second, the double hermeneutic also refers to the fact that sociologically produced knowledge invariably feeds back into society and becomes re-interpreted as part of the larger social reality.[25]

While Giddens' notion of the double hermeneutic may not be terribly original, it does enable sociologists to grasp two aspects of the sociological implications of hermeneutics that they otherwise might never have considered. Secondly, while Giddens fails to provide any specific suggestions regarding the sociological analysis of the ontological status of understanding he is clearly on the right track when he identifies the "pre-reflective character of experience" as one aspect of the hermeneutic problem, and highlights the importance of presuppositions and the "tacit manner" in which "activities are made sense of" as important social phenomena.[26] In The Constitution of Society Giddens calls for the sociological analysis of what he terms "practical consciousness," and the tacit understandings which underly social action. However, while Giddens writes that "it would be an error to suppose that the non-discursive components of consciousness are necessarily more

---

[25] For Giddens' discussion of the "double hermeneutic" see Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory, 1982, pp. 1-17.

[26] Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 64.

difficult to study empirically than the discursive" he fails to offer any suggestions as to how this might be done.[27] In chapter seven we will address the question of how sociologists might begin to study the relationship between preconscious understandings (prejudices), conscious interpretations and social action.

---

[27] Giddens, The Constitution of Society, 1984, p. xxx.

Habermas' Reading of Gadamer

In West Germany Gadamer's work has received a considerable amount of attention. Among German social theorists the most vocal critic of Gadamer's hermeneutics has been Jürgen Habermas.[28] For more than twenty years now Habermas has been involved in a debate with Gadamer regarding the scope of hermeneutics and its relationship to social science and sociology. The Habermas-Gadamer debate has had the effect of forcing Gadamer to explicate the critical side of his hermeneutics, an aspect of his hermeneutics that was latent and subject to misinterpretation prior to his debate with Habermas.[29] In this sense, Gadamer has benefited greatly from his exchanges with Habermas. By contrast, it appears that Habermas has not benefited so greatly from the debate. This inference may be drawn from the fact that Habermas has not followed Gadamer's lead with respect to the critical dimensions of his hermeneutics, and has excluded Gadamer's insights from the formulation of his most comprehensive theoretical statement,

---

[28] The German philospher of social science Karl-Otto Apel has also studied Gadamer's hermeneutics closely. His writings are generally philosophical, however, whereas Habermas' are more social-theoretical.

[29] There is no shortage of literature on the debate between Gadamer and Habermas. Among the more readable and insightful commentaries is Jack Mendelson's "The Habermas-Gadamer debate." New German Critique, Vol. 18, 1979, pp. 44-73. For a more challenging commentary see Dieter Misgeld, "Critical theory and hermeneutics: The debate between Habermas and Gadamer." In On Critical Theory, edited by John O'Neill (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

The Theory of Communicative Action.[30] While his theoretical turn away from Gadamer has, in our opinion, rendered problematic Habermas' practical intentions regarding the empirical study of communicative action, his exchanges with Gadamer have nevertheless helped clear the way for other social theorists to explore the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for social theory.

While it is now generally agreed that their positions are considerably closer than had at one time been believed,[31] Habermas and Gadamer remain in disagreement over two crucially important points, one being the question of the universality of hermeneutics; the other being the methodological implications of Gadamer's view of the nature of interpretation. We will examine the nature of Habermas' critique of Gadamer after placing Habermas' concern over hermeneutics in its proper social-theoretical context.

As is well known, Jürgen Habermas is considered the heir of the tradition of social theory known as critical theory.[32] This tradition grew out of an effort to inform

---

[30] Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, volumes 1 and 2, translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (vol. 1) and 1987 (vol. 2).

[31] See Susan Hekman's discussion of what she describes as the "convergence position" with respect to Gadamer and Habermas in Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge, 1986, p. 138.

[32] For a comprehensive yet accessible discussion of the historical development and theoretical content of critical theory see David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory

the shortcomings of Marxism through a critical appropriation of Weber and Freud.[33] Among these shortcomings most central was Marx's "deterministic" and "positivistic" view of historical materialism. In an effort of reconstruction, Lukacs stressed the importance of subjectivity and the role of consciousness as it relates to social change. Lukacs' work drew principally upon Weber's writings on rationalization, and this was a theme that was to exert great influence over the central figures of critical theory. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse were greatly influenced by Weber's theory of rationalization and drew upon it to formulate their criticism of advanced industrial society. They viewed one of the most crucial problems of the twentieth century to be the eclipse of human reason by a strictly instrumental form of rationality. The problem with instrumental reason was considered to be its ability to reduce economic, political and ethical questions

---

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). See also Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1923-1950 (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).

[33] Our discussion of critical theory draws heavily on David Held, as well as the writings of Thomas McCarthy, including his introduction to the first volume of Habermas' The Theory of Communicative Action, and his The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, first published in 1978). Another important work on Habermas is Garbis Kortian, Metacritique, translated by John Raffan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Kortian's work places Habermas within the larger context of German philosophy and contrasts Habermas' philosophical commitments with other critical theorists.

to the form of a simple means-ends or cost-benefit analysis. Weber appealed to critical theorists because he articulated in sociological terms the anxiety which seemed to be spreading during the early decades of this century as a result of the ever-expanding application of instrumental reason to all forms of life. By the nineteen thirties, this feeling of anxiety was being reflected in popular culture, and the advent of electronic media and mass-culture signaled to critical theorists the birth of a new social dimension which denied a strict Marxist interpretation. On a political level, Marx's critique of political economy appeared sophomoric in its inability to explain the rise of fascism and the oppressive and disappointing reality of Soviet socialism. The core problem of modern man appeared to be much more complicated than Marx had suggested. While the critical theorists were prepared to maintain the basic Marxist formula which viewed social and political relations as epiphenomena of economic condition, it was clear that Marx's critique needed to be reworked to include such phenomena as the institutional- ization of reason and the technological nature of modern existence. In articulating this critique it was to Weber, and also to Freud, that Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse turned.

Whereas Marx views class conflict as the key problem underlying other contemporary social problems, it is arguable that in Weber's view the key social problem facing

advanced industrial societies is that of a crisis of reason. By reason we mean, most generally, what Giddens describes as knowledgeability; the interpretive ability we have which enables us to make decisions regarding social action. Whereas Marx views technological advance as a positive development in the sense that he believed it would lead to the transformation of the forces of production, and ultimately, to the transformation of capitalism, Weber views technological advance much more sceptically. Weber's view of rationalization or modernization is, in fact, paradoxical, for it contains a deep rooted tension regarding the pros and cons of the institutionalization of instrumental reason. Weber welcomed rationalization in the sense that the disenchantment which accompanied it enabled Westerners to overcome the destructive and irrational consequences of a mystical or romantic world view.[34] At the same time, however, Weber was torn by the dehumanizing consequences which resulted from the institutionalization of reason. The "iron cage" of which Weber spoke refers to the condition of rational, industrial humankind living in a world dominated by complex organizations drawing their principal strength (efficiency) from the suppression and exclusion of specifically "human" features of action, such

---

[34] Presumably, in a rational world, superstition would lose its sway and irrational action, for example, the burning of people at the stake for superstitious reasons, would no longer take place.

as emotion and moral sensibility. The suppression of emotion and moral sensibility is effected by the institutionalization of an "instrumentally-rational" model of decision-making. Within this model, the value of ends is taken for granted and the cognitive faculty is restricted to the narrow task of discerning the most efficient means in order that they be realized. When instrumental reason does examine the relative value of ends, it does so in a strictly utilitarian sense. In such instances the human faculty of reason is under-utilized, for its natural ability to question the non-quantifiable value of ends is precluded. According to Weber, in a bureaucracy, for example, decisions are made according to pre-established criteria, without regard for the personal questions or suspicions which a bureaucrat might have with regard to the meaning of a pre-determined end. Weber unequivocably viewed this as a deformation of human reason, and as such, a form of dehumanization. The power of this critique is undeniable, and it gave direction to the work of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse who, each in his own way, attempted to document the deformation of reason and establish its implications for contemporary social life. Stated most succinctly, these efforts amounted to a critique of contemporary culture and consciousness.

Like his forebears, Jürgen Habermas has been profoundly influenced by Weber's critique of rationalization. In fact,

the main concern of his magnum opus, The Theory of Communicative Action, concerns the extent to which the institutionalization of instrumental reason on a systematic level has seeped into the life-world, and as a result, has exacerbated the "systematic distortion of communication." In common language, this means that Habermas is concerned with the extent to which formal modes of discourse and interaction, those typical of institutions such as political parties, education and complex organizations, have affected the realm of everyday conversation and individual life. This is consistent with the concern of Weber and critical theorists over the deformation of reason with one important difference. Whereas Weber and the critical theorists took as their focus of study reason itself or consciousness, Habermas instead takes as his focus language or communicative action. This, in fact, is the central point of divergence between Habermas and his predecessors. Habermas has argued that the cul de sac within which critical theorists ultimately found themselves stemmed from the fact that they had focused their studies at the wrong level of analysis. In Habermas' view, more primary than consciousness is language and communicative discourse. By focusing his research at this level of analysis, Habermas believes he will be able to avoid the problems which led the

earlier critical theorists to their defeatist conclusions.[35]

Habermas' concern with Gadamer's hermeneutics should be read as an outgrowth of the linguistic turn which he has given to critical theory. While this turn has brought him into contact with Gadamer's writings, it should be emphasized that Habermas has also been influenced by natural-language and analytic philosophy. It is arguable, in fact, that Habermas has been influenced more by these schools of thought than he has by Continental hermeneutics. The Theory of Communicative Action synthesizes ideas from the later Wittgenstien, Austin, Searle, and Chomsky, marrying them to the classical contributions of Weber, Durkheim, Mead and Parsons. This synthesis takes place within the context of Marxist reconstructionism. Interestingly, while several of Habermas' works published prior to The Theory of Communicative Action include extensive discussions of Gadamer's hermeneutics, references to Gadamer are curiously absent from both volumes of this work.[36] This is illustrative of the fact that Habermas'

---

[35] There is another point of divergence separating Habermas from the critical theorists who preceded him, that being his philosophical leanings towards neo-Kantianism. This point is made by Garbis Kortian in Metacritique, translated by John Raffan (New York: Cambridge University Press,1980). Generally speaking, critical theorists were more greatly influenced by Hegel than by Kant. This was especially so in the case of Horkheimer.

[36] Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, volumes 1 and 2, translated by Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (vol. 1) and 1987 (vol. 2).

social theoretical application of Gadamer's hermeneutics has been extremely limited, and that, perhaps more importantly, Habermas does not see the potential of applying Gadamer in the context of sociology. Nevertheless, among contemporary social theorists, Habermas is unique in the sense that he more than any other has studied Gadamer's hermeneutics closely and has taken him to task on a number of his claims. As Dallmayr and McCarthy point out, the growing discussion of Gadamer's hermeneutics in the English-speaking world is largely due to the efforts of Habermas.[37] These efforts have contributed greatly to establishing the relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for social-theoretical questions and issues regarding the methodology of the social sciences.

As for the importance of Gadamer's hermeneutics in Habermas' work, we have already discussed the fact that Habermas does not cite Gadamer in his magnum opus. The most tangible application of Gadamer's hermeneutics in Habermas' work is found in the latter's methodological critique of positivism. It is, indeed, no exaggeration to say that Habermas has interpreted the sociological significance of Gadamer in strictly methodological terms. This, we will argue, is perhaps Habermas' biggest shortcoming regarding his encounter with Gadamer, for his methodological

---

[37] F. Dallmayr and T. McCarthy, eds., Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, pp. 287-288. Dallmayr and McCarthy also credit Karl-Otto Apel for playing an important role in introducing Gadamer to Anglo-American philosophers.

preoccupation with Gadamer has blinded him from seeing the wider sociological possibilities presented by his work. Perhaps the biggest oversight of Habermas has been his inability to trace out the extent to which Gadamer's concepts of the prejudiced nature of interpretation and hermeneutical reflection might constitute important and challenging research topics for sociology.

With the publication of his review of Gadamer's Truth and Method,[38] it became clear that Habermas was not prepared to accept a number of Gadamer's central points; nor was he interested in studying Gadamer's hermeneutics with an eye towards establishing its full sociological significance. Habermas' review article in fact began a longstanding debate between himself and Gadamer, and the opinions of commentators are mixed regarding who has emerged with the upper hand. One thing is clear. The true benefactors of the debate have been its followers, for the debate has forced its participants to explicate aspects of their positions that had not been entirely clear. At this point a consensus has emerged in the secondary literature to the effect that the positions of these two thinkers are closer than had originally been believed. At least two important issues continue to separate the two, however, one being the question of the universality of hermeneutics, the other

---

[38] Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method," in F. Dallmayr and T. A. McCarthy, eds., Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, pp. 335-363.

concerning the scope and function of critical reflection. Related to this second point of contention is Habermas claim that Gadamer's hermeneutics lacks a critical dimension and must therefore be supplemented with ideology-critique. Whereas Habermas adheres to an essentially Cartesian view of reflection, a view which believes that one can suspend judgment on certain objects of thought, thereby attaining an objective interpretive perspective, Gadamer remains committed to an ontological view of reflection. This view holds that reflection is constituted through personal-historical experience, and as such, can never become fully free of personal judgment regarding the meaning of the objects it seeks to understand. This is because such meaning is ultimately a practical relationship of understanding, and not merely a conscious relation. As such, the emancipatory effect of reflection is much less than it might appear to be at first glance. Since the prejudices constitutive of the process of reflection must to some extent always remain hidden from conscious reflection, our conscious interpretations always appear to be more autonomous than they actually are. That is, understanding always involves more than we can consciously grasp, even though we might consciously believe that our consciousness may stand alone from the history which constitutes it.

The Gadamer-Habermas Debate

Our discussion of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas will focus on its two key issues: 1) Habermas' claim that Gadamer's hermeneutics lacks a critical dimension and must therefore be supplemented with ideology-critique, and 2) Habermas' rejection of hermeneutics' claim to universality. While it is true that the first issue may be interpreted as a consequence of the second, it was to the allegedly a-critical nature of Gadamer's hermeneutics that Habermas first turned his attention. It is also the main criticism which Habermas develops in his review of Truth and Method, the piece which began the exchange with Gadamer and that which is considered by some to be the debate's "central document."[39] We will therefore begin our analysis of the debate with a discussion of Habermas' critical review, taking as our central focus Habermas' claim that Gadamer's hermeneutics is unacceptably conservative.

Habermas' claim that Gadamer's hermeneutics is a-critical and therefore must be supplemented with ideology critique is grounded in his criticism of Gadamer's interpretation of the relationship between tradition and reason. Habermas asserts that "Gadamer knows that the hermeneutic sciences first developed in reaction to a

---

[39] Dallmayr and McCarthy, Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, p. 288.

decline in the binding character of traditions."[40] In this respect, Habermas portrays hermeneutics, including Gadamer's hermeneutics, as inherently conservative. Habermas grants that "understanding- no matter how controlled it may be- cannot simply leap over the interpreter's relationships to tradition."[41] But he argues at the same time that this does not mean that traditions are not profoundly changed by scientific reflection. In other words, Habermas accuses Gadamer of failing to appreciate the power of reflection vis-a-vis tradition. Referring to scientific self-reflection Habermas writes

> this type of reflection is no longer blinded by the illusion of an absolute, self-grounded autonomy and does not detach itself from the soil of contingency on which it finds itself. But in grasping the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and on which it turns back, reflection shakes the dogmatism of life practices.[42]

Habermas builds his case by criticizing Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice. He asks rhetorically, "does it follow from the unavoidability of hermeneutic anticipation eo ipso that there are legitimate prejudices?"[43] Habermas follows this question by accusing Gadamer of a pre-Enlightenment conservatism. This inference of Habermas is

---

[40] Habermas, "A review of Gadamer's Truth and Method," in Dallmayr and McCarthy, Understanding and Social Inquiry, 1977, p. 356.

[41] Ibid., p. 357.

[42] Ibid., p. 357.

[43] Ibid., p. 357.

based on his reading of Gadamer's defense of the notion of authority, which in Gadamer's view depends not on obedience but on reason. Interestingly, in his own summarization of Gadamer's hermeneutics Habermas provides a description which, at least on an implicit level, reveals its inherently critical nature. Yet Habermas fails to grasp this critical nature despite the fact that it is implied by his own description of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Summarizing Gadamer's position Habermas writes

> prejudices are ... the conditions of possible knowledge. This knowledge is raised to reflection when it makes the normative framework itself transparent while moving around in it. In this way hermeneutics also makes us conscious of that which is already historically prestructured by inculcated tradition in the very act of understanding.[44]

Habermas apparently misses the fact that the moment of becoming conscious of the prestructured nature of our understanding is a critical moment. It is a moment the critical nature of which is indistinguishable from the critical moment described by Marxists when one overcomes false consciousness and becomes aware of his historical-economic condition. In a Marxist sense, the unconsious structuring of experience stemming from one's economic condition is grasped through an interpretive experience which provides an awareness of a force operating behind one's back, namely, the force of being on the exploited side of an exploitative economic relation. In a strictly

---

[44] Ibid., p. 357.

hermeneutical sense, such a moment involves becoming aware of the prejudiced nature of interpretation owing to the constitutive nature of our historical-situation.

Habermas misinterprets Gadamer's notion that the nature of interpretation is prejudiced to mean that reason itself is rendered impotent owing to the omnipotence of history. This reading, however, suggests that Habermas does not grasp one of the most important aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics. This aspect may be explicated by way of a comparison between hermeneutics and structuralism. Whereas structuralists would tend to view the interpretive experience of the subject as epiphenomena of unmediated underlying symbolic structures, a Gadamerian would view the interpretive experience of the subject as constitutive of, as well as constituted by, its historical situation. It is indeed true that the interpretive experience of the individual is constituted by its historical situation, yet at the same time the experience of the individual involves the mediation of the linguistic tradition of which it is a part. This is what Gadamer means when he points out that traditions do not endure simply by virtue of the weight of their own inertia. They are lived, and as such, change while they remain more or less the same. Habermas, however, fails to grasp the significance of the mediating ability of the subject in Gadamer's hermeneutics. This undoubtedly stems from the rationalist or epistemological view of reason held by

Habermas, as distinguished from the ontological view of reason held by Gadamer. Habermas writes

> the substantiality of what is historically pregiven does not remain unaffected when it is taken up in reflection. A structure of preunderstanding or prejudgment that has been rendered transparent can no longer function as a prejudice. But this is precisely what Gadamer seems to imply.[45]

This quotation shows that Habermas fails to realize that affecting one's experience of the historically pregiven, and overcoming it as it functions as a prejudice in any "final" sense, are two very different matters. From a Gadamerian perspective, one would agree with Habermas that the historically pregiven does not remain unaffected when it is consciously experienced. However, the Gadamerian would differ fundamentally from the Habermasian with regard to the nature of this effect. Whereas the Habermasian would view the historically pregiven as an object that may be posited and isolated theoretically much as a biologist might isolate a particular cell and dissect it through critical analysis, a Gadamerian would deny the possibility of such a dissection, for in Gadamer's view the historically pregiven is constitutive of the interpretive experience itself, and as such, can never be completely isolated as an object of reflection.[46] This is the essence of the hermeneutic

---

[45] Ibid., p.358.

[46] For an excellent discussion of this important point, see J. Weinsheimer, Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 48.

circle. Prejudices are constitutive of interpretive experience itself, and therefore cannot be isolated epistemologically and objectified, since their isolation would require the abandonment of the experience which understanding is. Nevertheless, Habermas is correct, in some sense, in asserting that the historically pregiven may be affected through reflection. It is not, however, affected as an object. It is affected instead by virtue of the fact that the conscious experience of the historically pregiven itself becomes part of one's experience, and as such, part of the historically pregiven which is then constitutive of future experience. In other words reflection affects prejudices not by directly affecting particular prejudices in moments of transcendental reflection, but by expanding the interpretive horizons through which particular prejudices will themselves be experienced differently in the future. Hermeneutical reflection affects one's understanding, one's way of relating to the world. This is distinct from Habermas' view of critical reflection as a process of isolating a belief or prejudice and then changing it through a conscious decision.

This means that Habermas' notion that once a prejudice is rendered transparent it can no longer function as a prejudice is fundamentally mistaken. This is because the prejudices themselves never become objects of reflection in the manner which he claims. This precludes the possibility

that prejudices could be eradicated in any definite or final sense. It nevertheless does allow for the possibility of what might be termed, for lack of a better term, the outgrowing of particular prejudices over time. But such an outgrowing does not stem from a supreme act of reflection; a rational purge of the preconscious, if you will. It instead occurs as an ontological transformation involving critical discourse which may result in personal growth and change. Such change would, in turn have the effect of structuring interpretive experience differently than it had been structured or constituted in the past.

It is not, therefore, the case that Gadamer denies the "power of reflection," as Habermas claims.[47] It is instead the case that he explicates the ontological nature of understanding and of its principal insight that being is always more than consciousness. In the process, Gadamer makes a sober case for the limitations of reason, owing to its inescapable historical situatedness. Whereas Habermas remains committed to the Enlightenment's view of reason, Gadamer simply points out that, compared to our conscious beliefs, our actual relationship to the world is a more powerful determinant of interpretive experience. This does not deny the fact that reflection mediates our relationship to the world, it simply emphasizes the fact that this mediation always takes place within an historical context.

---

[47] Ibid., p. 358.

In light of a number of passages in Truth and Method it is understandable how Habermas could construe Gadamer as a political and theoretical conservative. In some passages, Gadamer suggests a structuralist or determinist view of the individual and his relation to history. For example, consider the following excerpt from the Part Two of Truth and Method.

> Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.[48]

This passage leaves open to interpretation the extent to which Gadamer is willing to view the reflective activity of an individual as affective with regard to tradition. From a Habermasian perspective, a perspective still very much influenced by the Enlightenment's view of reason, it is not difficult to infer from this passage that Gadamer is a conservative who underestimates the power of reflection. However, when we move beyond this view and emphasize the historicality or historical situatedness of reflection, as Gadamer does, this view does not appear conservative so much as it appears realistic. Gadamer's view of the relation between reflection and history may, in fact, be interpreted rather radically, for it suggests that true enlightenment

---

[48] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 245.

requires much more than a faith in reason. It requires an active critical-discursive engagement with one's own historical situation, not simply a rational critique of that which is objectified as tradition. It is as if the Enlightenment severed the mutually constitutive connection between self and tradition, and in doing so, could not help but posit a somewhat exaggerated and unrealistic view of reason, having artificially separated it from its constitutive content. Gadamer rejoins what the Enlightenment has severed by illustrating the historical situatedness of the individual. This reconnection means that in order correctly to analyze or criticize tradition we must also take into account its constitutive effect in the reasoning subject's understanding. This is why an interpretive commitment to self-criticism (hermeneutical reflection on one's prejudices) follows from Gadamer's reconnection of individual and linguistic tradition.

The Enlightenment's severing of subject and tradition inadvertently led to a severing of subject and biography, for the exercise of reason on behalf of the subject no longer had to take into consideration its historical situation, having already separated subject from tradition and having posited the latter as authoritarian and dogmatic. This is why the Enlightnement was satisfied with a commitment toward other-criticism, criticism which is typically externally directed; and this is why Gadamer's

interpretation adds a requirement of self-criticism, which takes the form of hermeneutical reflection and its goal of effective-historical consciousness. This point is very important. Once Gadamer accepts the historical or prejudiced nature of interpretation he imposes a demand on reflection which escaped the intellectual grasp of the Enlightenment. The attitude toward reason propagated by Kant, the call to have the courage to think for oneself, was pretentious in that it mistakenly viewed the "self" as an entity unto itself; as a rational subject capable of transcending the confines of history through reason. In hindsight, such a view may be considered arrogant or presumptuous for it presumes that subjects constitute their knowledge themselves. It is a view which is, in a word, ignorant of the historical and social constitution of knowledge. Gadamer has therefore issued a corrective through which the Enlightenment's presumptuous view of reason may be squared with historical fact and brought into the twentieth century. What Gadamer adds to Kant's call for the courage to think for oneself is the need for one to think of oneself critically and historically. Because prejudices are constitutive of interpretation, it is not enough to think for oneself, one must think "with" oneself; with onself in the sense that the knowing self is socially constituted and co-exists with history. To think with oneself is therefore to take into account the constitutive

linguistic tradition with which our conscious self co-exists, and upon which it is dependent. One must at the same time think about the fact that the experience of thinking is itself constituted by assumed meanings the truth status of which is necessarily taken for granted during their moment of application. If we are to think "for" ourselves, and not delude ourselves while doing so, we must constantly ask ourselves what it is that is structuring the thoughts that we are experiencing; what it is that is going on behind our backs without our wanting or knowing. Herein lies the essentially critical dimension of Gadamer's hermeneutics, a dimension which belies the notion that Gadamer is a conservative, and also, the notion that hermeneutics must be supplemented with ideology critique. As Wright points out, in Gadamer's view

> to deny the necessity with which one's own prejudices come into play in the event of understanding is to deny the possibility that the truth of one's own prejudices come into question.[49]

As an intellectual tradition Marxism, which remains the core influence of Habermas' critical theory, has been successful at other-criticism, but has had difficulty acknowledging its own prejudices and has generally abstained from self-criticism. Gadamer views self-criticism (the ability to question one's prejudices) as a necessary component of

---

[49] Kathleen Wright, "Gadamer: The speculative structure of language," in Brice Wachterhauser, ed., Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, 1986, p. 201.

other-criticism, if other-criticism aspires to be anything more than presumptuous, fallacious, and hypocritical. From a Gadamerian view, to deny that the truth of one's prejudices is an open question is problematic, since our conscious interpretations are always at risk of being unknowingly falsely constituted. Moreover, to "claim to be free from prejudice is in reality a denial of tradition."[50] Specifically, it is a denial of the fact that our understanding is constituted or made possible by the fact that we are immersed in a historical situation and speak a particular language.

We have been arguing that Habermas is fundamentally mistaken to construe Gadamer as a conservative, our argument so far being based on Gadamer's emphasis on the importance of questioning one's prejudices through hermeneutical reflection. An additional argument in support of a non-conservative and perhaps radical interpretation of Gadamer's hermeneutics may be posited in terms of Gadamer's relationship to traditional hermeneutics. Like Heidegger, Gadamer's position within hermeneutics is radical in that he argues against the time-worn methodological view of hermeneutics in favor of an ontological and linguistical view of hermeneutics. This fact, however, does not enter into Habermas' formula. Nevertheless, the fact that

---

[50] Wright, "Gadamer: The speculative structure of language," 1986, p. 201.

Habermas construes Gadamer as a conservative is understandable when we take into account the respective historical contexts of these two thinkers. As Bernstein points out, Gadamer's intellectual development took place during a time when the continuity of the German philosophical tradition was still intact. Within this context the constitutive significance of tradition was readily apparent. It was, in fact, the reality of Gadamer's historical situation. In this sense the importance of tradition was obvious to Gadamer and could not help but influence the development of his ideas. By contrast, Habermas, thirty years or so younger than Gadamer, matured intellectually during a period of political and intellectual fragmentation. This may in part explain Habermas' eclecticism and propensity for drawing together theoretical strands from otherwise disparate schools of thought. More importantly, however, was Habermas' witnessing during his intellectually formative years of the irrationality of Nazism, a witnessing which has left Habermas an embittered critic of Heidegger, Gadamer's mentor.[51] In this sense, Gadamer's discussion of the preconscious structuring of experience owing to tradition, and the limitations of reason which such a position requires, strikes a sensitive chord in

---

[51] While the extent of Heidegger's involvement in the National Socialist German Workers' party was not explicitly clear for many years, it is now evident that Heidegger supported the party until its demise.

Habermas. Given his natural suspicion regarding the tradition of thought drawn upon by Gadamer, and the numerous passages within Truth and Method which suggest a determinist bias in favor of tradition vis-a-vis the reasoning subject, it is not difficult to see how Habermas could have arrived at his conclusions regarding the conservativism of Gadamer.

While we may read Truth and Method with an eye toward bringing out and emphasizing its inherently critical dimensions it is nevertheless true that these dimensions were not terribly pronounced in the work; they were more latent than manifest. This undoubtedly contributed to Habermas' conservative interpretation of Gadamer's hermeneutics and his assertion that it is incapable of ideology critique. However, in Gadamer's response to Habermas' review of Truth and Method he leaves no doubt as to the critical nature of his hermeneutics.[52] Before discussing Gadamer's response we should summarize the main points of Habermas' criticism as presented in his review essay. As we have seen, Habermas contends that Gadamer 1) underestimates the power of reflection, 2) absolutizes tradition and treats it conservatively as something that

---

[52] What is perhaps Gadamer's most definitive response to Habermas' critique of Truth and Method and Gadamer's hermeneutics in general appears in the essay "On the scope and function of hermeneutical reflection," in Philosophical Hermeneutics. Translated by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 18-43. (The essay "On the scope and function of hermeneutical reflection" is translated in this edition by G. B. Hess and R. E. Palmer.)

should be continued and assimilated, and 3) has created an a-critical hermeneutics that must be supplemented with ideology critique.

In his response to these assertions Gadamer wastes no time in explicating the critical nature of his hermeneutics. The essay opens as follows:

> Philosophical hermeneutics takes as its task the opening up of the hermeneutical dimension in its full scope, showing its fundamental significance for our entire understanding of the world and thus for all the various forms in which this understanding manifests itself: from personal experience by the individual in society to the way in which he encounters society; and from the tradition as it is built of religion and law, art and philosophy, to the revolutionary consciousness that unhinges the tradition through emancipatory reflection.[53]

It is clear from this definition of hermeneutics that Gadamer 1) acknowledges the emancipatory and mediating power of reflection as it relates to tradition, and consequently 2) does not absolutize tradition. It is also clear that 3) Gadamer sees a critical dimension within hermeneutics, a revolutionary dimension capable of emancipating us from what might be dogmatic within our tradition. Regarding reflection, Gadamer writes "reflection on a given preunderstanding brings before me something that otherwise happens <u>behind my back</u>. Something- but not everything."[54] This is because, as we have seen, the full meaning of our

---

[53] Hans-Georg Gadamer, <u>Philosophical Hermeneutics</u>. Translated by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 18.

[54] Ibid., p. 38.

being cannot be captured consciously. In this sense reflection is always limited, but its inherent limitedness does not preclude its ability to make us aware of the history operative in our preunderstanding. While this awareness is never complete or absolute, it is our only means of overcoming the dogmatic aspects of our prejudices. This is why, despite its limitations, hermeneutical reflection is essential and vital.

Habermas infers from Gadamer's emphasis on the constitutive and all-inclusive nature of tradition that in Gadamer's view tradition is fixed or absolute. But as Gadamer points out, this is an incorrect inference. Gadamer writes "the principle of hermeneutics simply means that we should try to understand everything that can be understood."[55] This effort of understanding preserves tradition only to the extent that that which is mediated is experienced as true and worthy of assimilation. In other words, tradition is not a static construct. As such it is constitutive of, and necessarily mediated by, interpretive experience.

Finally, with respect to Habermas' charge that hermeneutics is incapable of revealing and criticizing structures of political and economic domination, and must therefore be supplemented with ideology critique, Gadamer responds

---

[55] Ibid., p. 31.

> who says that these concrete, so-called real factors are outside the realm of hermeneutics? From the hermeneutical standpoint, rightly understood, it is absolutely absurd to regard the concrete factors of work and politics as outside the scope of hermeneutics. What about the vital issue of prejudices with which hermeneutics deals? Where do they come from? Merely out of "cultural tradition"? Surely they do, in part, but what is tradition formed from?

In Gadamer's view tradition is formed through experience itself, and as such, tradition embodies economic, political and social experience as much as it does "cultural" experience. It follows that economic conditions, political power, and social relations are constitutive of the prejudices which structure experience. In this sense, they are an essential part of the historical effect which hermeneutical consciousness seeks to disclose and make explicit. Gadamer, in fact, turns the table on Habermas and counter-accuses him of an overly narrow view of cultural tradition. From Gadamer's view, it is only through reducing tradition to a narrow view of culture that hermeneutics could be portrayed as being a-critical or in need of assistance from critical theory.[56]

Gadamer's response to Habermas' accusations is grounded in his explication and assertion of the universality of hermeneutics. We have already discussed this notion in

---

[56] Gadamer writes, "the universality of the hermeneutical dimension is narrowed down, I think, when one area of understood meaning (for instance, the "cultural tradition") is held in separation from other recognizable determinants of social reality that are taken as the 'real' factors." Philosophical Hermeneutics, 1977, pp. 30-31.

terms of Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation. Simply stated, in Gadamer's view hermeneutics is universal because human experience is itself hermeneutical, that is, human experience involves understanding, interpretation and application. It is unfortunate that Habermas does not provide an account of how Gadamer comes to conclude that hermeneutics is universal, for this leaves us wondering exactly what he thinks the notion refers to. In light of the rest of Habermas' discussion on this issue it appears safe to say that he does not view hermeneutics' claim to universality in terms of Gadamer's analysis of the hermeneutical nature of experience.[57] On what grounds, then, does Habermas consider the claim to rest? As the following passage suggests, it appears that Habermas considers the claim to turn on Gadamer's notion of the historicity of understanding.

> Can there be an understanding of meaning in relation to symbolic structures formulated in everyday language that is not tied to the hermeneutic pre-supposition of context-dependent processes of understanding, an understanding that in this sense by-passes natural language as the last metalanguage?[58]

---

[57] We may speculate over the possibility that if Habermas were to consider the claim in terms of Gadamer's notion of the hermeneutical nature of experience he might have a different view of both the meaning of the claim and its legitimacy. It would seem that if one accepts the notion that experience itself involves understanding, interpretation, and application, then one must also accept Gadamer's claim regarding the universality of hermeneutics.

[58] Jürgen Habermas, "The hermeneutic claim to universality," in Josef Bleicher, ed., Contemporary Hermeneutics (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 189.

Habermas believes that if he can answer this question in the affirmative he has domonstrated the limitations of philosophical hermeneutics. Habermas envisions two possible routes by which he might attain an such an answer. The first is by way of psychoanalysis- "or the critique of ideology where collective pheomena are concerned"; the second is through the "general theory of natural languages," in the tradition of Chomsky and Searle. In the latter case, Habermas believes that such a theory may someday be able to "attach ... each element of a natural language ... to structural descriptions formulated in theoretical language." If this could be done then the theoretical language could "take the place of the hermeneutical understanding of meaning."[59] Habermas, however, admits that at this point such a notion amounts to little more than speculation. However, the same is not true with regard to psychoanalysis, and it is by way of psychoanalysis that Habermas believes he has refuted hermeneutics' claim to universality. In Habermas' view, hermeneutics is not universal because hermeneutical reflection is incapable of uncovering distorted unconscious motivations which result from contradictions inherent in political-economic structures. We may explore this argument by going back to Habermas'

---

[59] Ibid., pp. 189-190. It would be interesting to ask Habermas how this would differ from the failed attempt of the Vienna Circle to reduce natural language to formal logic.

Knowledge and Human Interests in which Habermas first describes Freud's psychoanalytic model as a form of "depth hermeneutics."

In Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas does not discuss Gadamer's hermeneutics but instead contrasts Freud's work with that of Dilthey. Nevertheless this effort is important to our discussion for his discussion of Freud serves as the foundation for Habermas' critique of hermeneutics' claim to universality, which is explicated and specificied in several later essays.

At this point in our discussion several points are worth mentioning. Habermas' turn to Freud is consistent with critical theory's general concern over the relationship between subjectivity and objective social-economic conditions. For this reason Habermas' move is logical and is in some sense predictable given his theoretical proximity to earlier critical theorists. On a more substantive level, Habermas' turn to Freud marks a transitional point in his theoretical development. His discussion of "depth hermeneutics" clears the way for the completion of his linguistic turn, for in analyzing Freud's approach to the diagnosis of neuroses Habermas finds it necessary to posit an ideal-typical case of non-neurotic communication. This effort ultimately leads Habermas to the question of the nature of interpersonal communication in an age typified by the ever increasing extension of instrumental-reason.

It should be clear, then, that the turn to Freud is an important step en route to Habermas' development of his theory of communicative action. And while Habermas eventually agrees with his critics and acknowledges the infeasibility of applying Freud's psychoanalytic model to social-structural critique, certain elements of Habermas' Freudian interpretation of hermeneutics remain implicit in his work. The most important of these elements is Habermas' methodological view of hermeneutics. In introducing the chapter on Freud in Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas states that "psychoanalysis is relevant to us as the only tangible example of a science incorporating methodical self-reflection."[60] Habermas' interest in Freud, and also in hermeneutics, therefore, should be read as the result of an interest in illuminating the emancipatory dimenions of reflection. What distinguishes Habermas from Gadamer with regard to reflection is that Habermas begins with a scientific or theoretical model of reflection, whereas Gadamer, following Heidegger, begins with quotidian understanding, and views reflection as the conscious experience of understanding. Habermas' view of hermeneutics is therefore inherently methodological and therefore fundamentally different from Gadamer's.

In Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas aims to

---

[60] Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, translated by Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, first published in English in 1971), p. 214.

demonstrate how psychoanalysis, as an exemplar of methodical self-reflection, may be applied on a societal level in order to facilitate mass emancipation. Habermas views Freud's model as a means of disclosing the internal distortion of three categories of expression (linguistic elements, action patterns and expressions).

> The grammar of ordinary language governs not only the connection of symbols but also the interweaving of linguistic elements, action patterns, and expressions. In the normal case, these three categories of expression are complementary, so that linguistic expressions "fit" experiential expressions; of course, their integration is imperfect, which makes possible the latitude necessary for indirect communications. In the limiting case, however, a language game can disintegrate to the point where the three categories of expressions no longer agree. Then actions and non-verbal expressions belie what is expressly stated.[61]

According to Habermas, while Dilthey takes the focus of hermeneutical reflection to be the "subjective consciousness" of the individual, Freud takes as his focus that which is "behind manifest memory." Despite the fact that Freud does not view his work as "hermeneutical," Habermas describes his psychoanalytic model as an example of "depth hermeneutics." According to Habermas, psychoanalysis probes more deeply than Dilthey's method of Verstehen because it "seeks to comprehend ... symbolic structures ... that are corrupted by the impact of internal conditions." In Habermas' view these internal conditions are systematically produced on the social-structural level.

---

[61] Ibid., p. 218.

Habermas considers these conditions, or neuroses, to be the result of one's social and economic condition. In this way Habermas is able to draw the connection between psychoanalysis and the overcoming of false consciousness, and posit Freud's model as an exemplar of emancipatory reason.[58]

> Neuroses distort symbolic structures in all three dimensions: linguistic expression (obsessive thoughts), actions (repetition compulsions), and bodily experiential expression (hysterical body symptoms).[59]

In Habermas' view, these disturbances are incomprehensible to the actor, and therefore require a systematic "depth hermeneutical" analysis, such as that posited by Freud.

Two years after the appearance of the German edition of Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas published an essay entitled "On Systematically Distorted Communication."[60] In this essay Habermas reiterates in summary form his interpretation of Freud's psychoanalytic model as presented in Knowledge and Human Interests. He also outlines what he considers to be the main features of "normal" communication; communication which is not systematically distorted. This move became necessary for Habermas since his focus on neuroses as examples of distorted communication raised the question of what undistorted communication might look like.

---

[58] Ibid., pp. 215-219.

[59] Ibid., p. 219.

[60] Jürgen Habermas, "On systematically distorted communication," Inquiry Vol. 13 No. 3, 1970, pp. 205-218.

In this sense, then, Habermas' turn to Freud in Knowledge and Human Interests may be viewed as the impetus to his conceptualization of an "ideal-speech situation." While the soundness of this move may be questioned on a number of levels, Habermas' concept is important for this work in a real sense, for it unintentionally lends support to the argument that hermeneutical reflection is a crucially important phenomenon which cannot be reduced to a psychological process. For even if there existed an ideal-speech situation, a situation free of the social structural conditions responsible for psychological neuroses, there would still exist the need for the development an effective historical consciousness, on both the individual and institutional levels, for our conscious interpretation of reality would still be constituted by prejudices. In other words, the social relevance of hermeneutical reflection, and hermeneutics in general, is not restricted to a certain segment of the population, nor by the possibility of a historical situation free of symbolic distortion, for it concerns the determinate history operative in experience itself.

It is important to reiterate at this point that in Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas' model of general hermeneutics is the philological hermeneutics of Dilthey. This is important, for it enables Habermas to argue that psychoanalysis can achieve understanding where philological

hermeneutics cannot. This means that Habermas has already, at least implicity, attacked the universality of hermeneutics, even when it was not his explicit intention to do so. Habermas points out that Dilthey's focus is on the "meaning structures" that are "consciously intended." By contrast, Freud's focus is on unconscious motivation. Taking Dilthey's hermeneutics as his focus, and viewing it as the study of subjective consciousness, it is easy for Habermas to argue that Freud's psychoanalytic model enables us to go beyond traditional hermeneutics. Given that Habermas begins with Dilthey's methodological view of hermeneutics, he appears correct in claiming that hermeneutical reflection is by itself incapable of interpreting that which psychoanalysis is capable of interpreting. The problem here, however, is that this argument against the universality of hermeneutics assumes a methodological view of hermeneutics in the first instance. The question for Habermas is this: when his analysis of hermeneutics instead bases itself upon Gadamer's hermeneutics, what are the consequences for his critique of the universality of hermeneutics? Unlike Dilthey, Gadamer does not view hermeneutics as a method, nor does he limit the focus of hermeneutics to the questioning of subjective consciousness.

In his essay "The hermeneutic claim to universality" Habermas draws a distinction between traditional and

philosophical hermeneutics and explicitly calls into question Gadamer's claim regarding the universality of hermeneutics. While in this case Habermas' focus falls on Gadamer's hermeneutics, his psychoanalytic argument is essentially the same: systematically distorted communications (neuroses) are impervious to hermeneutical reflection, as Gadamer has defined it. However, if we view hermeneutics as a concern over the hermeneutical nature of experience itself, as Gadamer does, then it follows that psychoanalysis is not at all a limiting case of hermeneutics. This is in fact the main point of Gadamer's response to Habermas' criticism regarding the universality of hermeneutics. As Gadamer points out, even during the process of psychoanalysis language is spoken, and interpreted, and in this sense, psychoanalysis is a derivative or thematized variation of hermeneutical experience.[61] As such, the notion that neuroses apparently require an elaborate process of analysis does not at all undermine hermeneutics' claim to universality. Again, it is as if Habermas (not unlike Giddens) believes that the notion of the universality of hermeneutics is a claim to some

---

[61] Gadamer also attacks Habermas for attempting to raise to an authoritative or judgmental level a model of interpretation which is scientific in nature. In addition, he attacks the specific features of the structure of the psychoanalytic doctor-patient relationship, such as the fact that the relationship has an economic dimension, and the "interpretation" provided by the doctor is legally defined as a service. See Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, 1977, pp. 29-42.

superordinate power which aims to subsume all other disciplines under its jurisdiction. On the contrary, the universality of hermeneutics simply refers to the fact that experience itself is hermeneutical.[62]

Despite our many criticisms of Habermas in this chapter one should not get the impression that Habermas is totally off base in his interpretation of Gadamer. As we mentioned, in the essay "The hermeneutic claim to universality" Habermas draws a distinction between traditional and philosophical hermeneutics, and correctly notes the post-methodological nature of Gadamer's hermeneutics. And while Habermas fails to grasp several of Gadamer's key notions (such as the universality of hermeneutics), it is also true that he correctly grasps other aspects, such as the notion that understanding is self-understanding.[63] The problem, however, is that Habermas fails to see the sociological importance of various Gadamerian insights. For example, rather than pursue the social and sociological significance of hermeneutical reflection Habermas is instead drawn to explain the nature of communicative competence. As compared

---

[62] Habermas' strictly methodological view of hermeneutics ignores the accomplishments of Heidegger and Gadamer and lapses into the pre-modern view of hermeneutics.

[63] Habermas writes, "I find Gadamer's real achievement in the demonstration that hermeneutic understanding is linked with transcendental necessity to the articulation of an action-orienting self-understanding," in "A review of Gadamer's Truth and Method, 1977, p. 351.

with hermeneutical reflection,

> the rational reconstruction of a system of linguistic rules ...is undertaken with the aim of explaining linguistic competence. It makes explicit those rules which a native speaker has an implicit command of; but it does not as such make the subject conscious of suppositions he is not aware of. The speaker's subjectivity, constituting the horizon within which reflexive experience can be gained, remains excluded in principle. One could say that a successful linguistic reconstruction makes us conscious of the apparatus of language that is functioning without our being aware of it.[64]

Habermas continues by pointing out that, from a Gadamerian standpoint, such an analysis would constitute an inauthentic use of language, and would therefore be rejected in principle. In light of this Habermas then asks, given philosophical hermeneutics' lack of concern over linguistics, what is its relevance? Habermas is partially justified for asking this question, for while Gadamer has emphasized the practical importance of hermeneutics, he has provided very little direction regarding the practical implications of his work for the social sciences.[65] The question for Habermas, however, is: what is the relevance of studying linguistic competence, given the fact that it is a pan-cultural universal? While this may be worthwhile in so far as it may give rise to contributions to basic

---

[64] Habermas, "The hermeneutic claim to universality," 1980, p. 186.

[65] As we mentioned earlier, Gadamer has suggested that his work may open new lines of questioning in the sciences; but Habermas appears to be shopping for answers, not questions, and appears impatient with the subtlety of Gadamer's suggestion.

research in linguistics, its significance pales in comparison with the thought of revealing the extent to which people experience the opportunity, or are prohibited from experiencing the opportunity, of actually calling into question the prejudices which constitute their experience. Habermas knows that hermeneutics concerns this experience, but fails to see the importance of studying it as a sociological topic. It is as if he is preoccupied with studying the ideas of his peers rather than those of the public. When he does mention the public, his focus is on rules and formal structures, not people and their prejudiced interpretive condition. His proposal is little more than a structural-functional analysis of linguistical competence. From a Gadamerian view, such a proposal can amount to little more than a politically impotent and socially alienated methodological exercise. A truly committed social theorist would be concerned not with helping society become aware of a functional apparatus which is taken for granted, but the determinate and coercive effect of concrete linguistical concepts, prejudices, which structure the individual experience of society.

Given philosophical hermeneutics' inability to provide Habermas with direction to his project, Habermas has no use for it. He does, however, see four important points to Gadamer's hermeneutics, all of which pertain to methodological issues.

1) Hermeneutic consciousness destroys the objectivist self-understanding of the traditional Geisteswissenschaften.

2) Hermeneutic consciousness ... reminds the social sciences of problems which arise from the symbolic pre-structuring of their object.

3) Hermeneutic consciousness ... affects the scientistic self-understanding of the natural sciences.

4) Hermeneutic consciousness is (responsible for) .... the translation of important scientific information into the language of the social life-world.[66]

With these concerns Habermas has, for his own purposes, exhausted Gadamer's hermeneutics.

In our view the real disappointment regarding Habermas' encounter with Gadamer is not so much that he fails to understand several of his key points, but rather that he fails to explore the sociological significance of those points which he properly grasps. Missing from Habermas' list of situations within which hermeneutics might find application is the common situation of conversation and interpretation. As demonstrated in chapter three, the hermeneutical problem is universal in the sense that hermeneutical reflection is relevant to all instances of interpretation, even those that might appear mundane or obvious, and most importantly in situations where meaning is being taken for granted. What is clear from this work is the fact that Habermas has failed to see the possibilities

---

[66] Habermas, "The hermeneutic claim to universality," 1980, pp. 186-187.

regarding the analysis of hermeneutical reflection as a topic in its own right. Rather than studying the phenomenon of reflection in its most basic and elementary forms, Habermas instead prefers to study it in abstract terms. There remains in Habermas' work an implicit value judgment regarding the knowledgeability of the public. He shares with Marx an elitist view of the status of the intelligensia, whose obligation it is to steer the line of march toward emancipation. There is no question that the efforts of Habermas are well intended. The question remains whether or not it is acceptable to believe that emancipation can be attained methodologically, in the scientific sense of the word. Habermas wants the same thing Gadamer wants, social emancipation. The difference lies in their strategies for its attainment. In Gadamer's view the best we can do, in our position as professional researchers, is to facilitate a discourse that will help people experience the historicity of their life with the hope that society in general will be able to develop an effective-historical consciousness. To think that this could be effected through creating a model of ideal discourse, and indoctrinating people into its methodology, is simply to mistake the experience of understanding from the ground up. While Habermas must be credited for introducing many of us to Gadamer, and also, for having forced Gadamer to explicate the implicitly critical dimensions of his hermeneutics, his

contributions toward establishing the social and sociological significance of his hermeneutics are severely limited.

CHAPTER VI

HERMENEUTICS AND INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

It is somewhat ironic that within interpretive sociology one cannot find a comprehensive theory of the nature of interpretation. What we find instead are social-psychological explanations of interaction (Mead), programmatic statements regarding the methodological requisites for an "interpretive" sociology (Weber), abstract generalizations regarding interpretive procedures (Schutz), and empirical studies showing the conventional construction of social reality (Garfinkel). The guiding question for our immediate discussion is the following. To what extent might these various efforts inform and guide our effort to establish the sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics?[1]

The term "interpretive sociology" is being used to refer to two distinct developments within American sociology; one having its roots in the German phenomenological tradition, the other in American pragmatism. What distinguishes these

---

[1] This is not an arbitrary question. We could quite easily focus instead on the importance of Gadamer's hermenutics for interpretive sociology. However, given the central aim of this work, which is to establish the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for <u>sociology in general</u>, our focus is appropriate. It is also worth noting that we cannot study the interpretive-sociological reaction to Gadamer's hermeneutics because his work has yet to be discussed by interpretive sociologists.

two strains of interpretive sociology from other varients of sociology is their common concern over the intersubjective dimensions of social action. That is, a concern over the extent to which social action may be considered a product of the interpretation of one's relationship to others and the world in general. Our discussion of interpretive sociology begins with a detailed analysis of Max Weber's methodological writings.

Max Weber and Interpretive Sociology

It is no exaggeration to say that interpretive sociology begins with Max Weber. It was Weber who, in opposition to the positivist tradition running from Saint-Simon to Comte to Durkheim, and the economic-positivism of the later Marx, first argued for the sociological study of meaningful social action. However, while many American sociologists are familiar with Weber's project in general terms, its specific meaning and content have been clouded by misrepresentation and misinterpretation. In light of this, it is necessary to discuss the nature of Weber's conceptualization of interpretive sociology prior to exploring its import for the sociological application of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Our discussion will be guided by two basic questions:

1) what does Max Weber mean by interpretive sociology?

2) what does Weber mean by Verstehen, the often mentioned but rarely correctly understood method of interpretive sociology?

In order to answer these questions we must first deconstruct the myths surrounding Weber's methodology resulting from misinterpretation and the inaccuracies of translation. One of these myths concerns the subject matter of interpretive sociology. As we shall see, the original, authoritative, English interpretations of Weber's conceptualization of interpretive sociology imply that the subject matter of interpretive sociology is the subjective, or psychological motivation underlying individual action. Related to this

myth is a second one which portrays the method of interpretive sociology (Verstehen) as one of psychological, empathetic introspection. We will organize our discussion of Weber around these two issues and conclude by summarizing those aspects of his project which bear on the importance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for sociology.

The problems regarding the provincialism of American sociology, some of which were discussed in chapter one, are very apparent in the case of the American reception and interpretation of the work of Max Weber. It is only relatively recently that critics have begun to re-examine the early and influential English translations of Weber's writings. What they have uncovered evidences that several aspects of Weber's work have been seriously misrepresented, and with it the nature and method of interpretive sociology.[2] Perhaps the most influential interpretation of Weber's conceptualization of interpretive sociology has been that provided by Talcott Parsons in The Structure of Social Action.[3] Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope contend, however, that Parsons' interpretation of Weber is "erroneous both in many of its particulars and in the general cast that it gives to

---

[2] Given that in Weber's work sociology comes closest to the hermeneutical tradition, it is reasonable to think that the misunderstanding regarding Weber's conceptualization of interpretive sociology is associated with Anglo-American sociology's misunderstanding of the nature and scope of hermeneutics in general.

[3] Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1949).

Weber's theoretical product."[4] This is ironic in that while we are indebted to Parsons for deparochializing Weber by importing his work into American sociology, the very success of his effort has "magnified a negative effect, namely, the distortion of Weber that is implicit in (his) interpretation."[5]

Cohen, et al. contend that Parsons mistakenly exaggerates the normative aspects of Weber's conception of social action. While Parsons argues correctly that Weber had an interest in the normative aspects of social action, Cohen, et al. contend that he exaggerated the importance of norms by asserting that they are "central to Weber's conception of social action."[6] It is very possible that Parsons' own preoccupation with the normative aspects of social action skewed his interpretation of Weber. Indeed, as Cohen, et al. point out, in The Structure of Social Action Parsons concludes that "there is no such thing as action except as effort to conform with norms."[7]

Of the four categories of social action outlined by Weber (traditional, instrumental-rational, value-rational

---

[4] Jere Cohen, Lawrence E. Hazelrigg and Whitney Pope, "De-Parsonizing Weber: A critique of Parsons' interpretation of Weber's sociology." American Sociological Review, Vol. 40, 1975, p. 229.

[5] Ibid., p. 229.

[6] Ibid., p. 231.

[7] Ibid., p. 231. The quote may be found in Parsons, The Structure of Social Action, 1949, pp. 76-77.

and affectual), it is only with regard to affectual action (which Parsons views as a residual category) that Parsons forgoes "any attempt to demonstrate the centrality of norms."[8] Based on a detailed analysis of Weber's description of social action, Cohen, et al., conclude that

> a category-by-category analysis shows that traditional behavior, usages and customs are primary habitual, while instrumentally rational behavior and complexes of interests are largely oriented to expediency rather than to norms. Only value-rational behavior is primarily normative in any of the senses intended by Parsons.[9]

The consequence of Parsons' exaggeration of the "normative" within Weber's conception of social action is that it obscures the importance which Weber attributes to domination. As Weber himself states, "every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominancy."[10] However, unlike Bendix, who translates Herrschaft as "domination," Parsons translates the term to mean "leadership," and this redefinition is crucially important.[11] Because Weber defines power (Macht) as the

---

[8] Ibid., p. 231.

[9] Ibid., p. 231.

[10] Ibid., p. 237. The quote may be found in Max Weber, Economy and Society, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich eds. (New York: Bedminster, 1968), p. 941.

[11] Ibid., p. 237.

imposition of one's will upon another,[12] and views power as the "general sense" of Herrschaft, Parsons in effect removes the conflictual dimensions of Weber's theory and misrepresents it as akin to his own consensus theory of social action.[13] Given the fact that the first edition of Parson's The Structure of Social Action was for many American sociologists their first introduction to Weber, Parsons may be held responsible for the generally conservative impression of Weber which many sociologists came to attain.[14]

---

[12] Weber's precise definition of power (Macht) is "the capacity of an individual to realize his will, even against the opposition of others." Max Weber, Economy and Society, 1968, p. 224.

[13] Randall Collins also emphasizes the conflictual dimensions of Weber's sociology and places him within the conflict tradition of social theory, along with Marx, in his Three Sociological Traditions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[14] In Parsons' reply to Cohen, et al.'s paper he writes "the authors have repeatedly accused me of distorting Weber's meaning. I'm afraid I must come back with the claim that, however that may be, they have distorted my meaning." Talcott Parsons "Comments: Reply to Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope." American Sociological Review Vol. 41, 1976, pp. 361-365. On page 361 Parsons points out that his critics "rely heavily on The Structure of Social Action ... and play down later writings on Weber." He then makes the point that his treatment of Weber in Structure was admittedly limited and did not pretend to be definitive. In addition, he makes the point that his views of Weber have developed and changed over time. This, however, merely confirms the significance of Cohen et al.'s paper. The interpretation of Weber in the Structure was considered definitive for many years and was of seminal importance, and despite Parsons' re-interpretations of Weber over time, his initial misinterpretations have had serious consequences for the development of Weberian scholarship in the English-speaking world.

The Psychological Rendering of Interpretive Sociology

Parsons' misrepresentation of Weber is not limited to his somewhat self-serving interpretation of Weber's theory of social action, but extends also to Weber's conception of interpretive sociology. Given the canonical importance of his 1947 co-authored translation of the first section of Wirtschaft und Gesselschaft (Economy and Society), which contains the basic concepts of interpretive sociology, Parsons may be held partly responsible for the misunderstanding regarding Weber's conception of the nature and method of interpretive sociology.[15] This work has, "for almost a generation ... been the main source for most American sociologists of Weber's basic concepts."[16] However, according to Munch, "this translation has given a definite psychological twist to Weber's concept of social action, particularly in terms of the 'imputation of motive' in a psychological sense."[17] Given the specificity and succinctness of Munch's explanation of the main problem underlying Parsons' misinterpretation, we will provide Munch's explanation in its entirety.

---

[15] A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

[16] Peter A. Munch, "'Sense' and 'intention' in Max Weber's theory of social action." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45 No. 4, 1975, p. 61.

[17] Ibid., p. 61.

> The difficulty seems to lie particularly with the word Sinn. Its closest equivalent in English is "sense." Henderson and Parsons, however, choose to translate it as "meaning," which has a strong connotation of "intended purpose." Thus, in translating gemeinter Sinn as "intended meaning," they reinforce the false connotation that Weber explicitly tried to guard against. Furthermore, in his comments to the translation, Parsons gives strong support to this purposive connotation and practically reduces soziales Handeln and Sinn, as well as Verstehen, to purely psychological concepts purportedly referring to a "state of mind" (Parsons' words) of the actor.[18]

According to Munch's reading of Weber, the "sense" of an action is "inherent in the structure of the action itself, regardless of the mental state of the actor, and is directly comprehensible to the recipient as well as to the observer in terms of established expectations based on verified experience."[19] This means that in Weber's view interpretive sociology is concerned with "the kind of human behavior that is 'sensible,' 'meaningful,' and 'comprehensible' in terms of established expectations, that is, in terms of norms and standards for 'reasonable' conduct and behavior shared by the actor and the actor's audience."[20] In light of this, Munch contends that "motive" should not be construed as a "state of mind" of the individual actor.

Munch's translation of Sinn as "sense," and his rendering of Weber's intended meaning, are both supported by Reinhard Bendix. Bendix points out in a footnote that the

---

[18] Ibid., p. 61.

[19] Ibid., p. 62.

[20] Ibid., p. 62, (author's emphasis).

"meaningful" in Weber's view of social action is not at all psychological but social.

> Weber recognized that much behavior is meaningful and and yet not the result of conscious deliberation. The conventional behavior that men in society take for granted is very often meaningful; it makes sense to them. "Making sense" is actually a better translation of the German Sinn than the term "meaning," which tends to have a poetic or philosophical connotation.[21]

In light of this observation we may recall Weber's definition that social action is meaningful in that it takes into account the expectations of others. It follows from the interpretations of Munch and Bendix that the process of taking behavioral expectations into account is based not on a psychological or exclusively conscious deliberation, but rather, on a general sense of understanding similar to that which is described by Heidegger: the meaning of social action stems from the fact that we are related to others and act according to these relations. We grasp the meaning which guides our social interactions on the basis of our experience of social interaction; not necessarily because we deliberate consciously on what we suspect is the ultimate "meaning" of the actions of another.

In all fairness it should be pointed out that Parsons is

---

[21] Reindhard Bendix, Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, first published in 1960) p. 474. Munch does not cite Bendix in his essay. He does, however, state that in interpreting Sinn as "sense" he is following a suggestion by C. Prendergast, "Phenomenology and sociology: A review of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz." Unpublished seminar paper, Department of Sociology, Southern Illinois University.

not completely responsible for his psychological-misinterpretation of Weber. As Munch concedes, some of the blame for the present confusion surounding Weber's interpretive sociology must go to Weber himself.[22] This is because Weber was not clear regarding the "intersubjective" nature of social action in his later works. According to Munch, Weber gave greater emphasis to the "subjective" aspects of social action in his later works in an effort to counter Simmel's argument, which favored a meta-physical and absolute conception of meaning. It is Munch's contention, however, that Weber's later emphasis on the subjective amounted to no more than a shift in emphasis and should not be read as change in the content of his theory. What is unfortunate, however, is that it is Weber's later writings which were the first to be translated. Weber's position regarding the subjectivity of social action thus came to be emphasized, and with this emphasis came the misinterpretation regarding the alleged psychological nature of Weber's conception of social action and its interpretive analysis.

In his relatively early writings, which Parsons neglected,[23] Weber explicitly distinguishes interpretive

---

[22] Munch, "'Sense' and 'intention' in Max Weber's theory of social action," 1975, p. 60.

[23] Parsons' analysis of Weber's methodological concepts, as presented in The Structure of Social Action, is based on his reading of Chapter one of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, which he would later co-translate, and his

sociology from psychology. The most important amongst these works, "Some categories of interpretive sociology," has only recently been translated into English.[24] In this essay Weber writes that the "specific focus" of interpretive sociology "... is not simply any kind of "inner state" or outer behavior whatever, but rather action." Following this passage Weber specifically defines what he means by "action" in the context of interpretive sociology.

> Action, specifically significant for interpretive sociology is, in particular, behavior that: (1) in terms of the subjectively intended meaning of the actor, is related to the behavior of others, (2) is codetermined in its course through this relatedness, and thus (3) can be intelligibly explained in terms of this (subjectively) intended meaning. (original emphasis)[25]

According to Weber, then, the subject matter of interpretive sociology is social action, action based on the interpretation of shared meaning. In Weber's words, interpretive sociology concerns itself with "the typical meaning-relationships of action."[26]

Later in this essay Weber states explicitly that

---

reading of Alexander von Schelting's Max Weber's Wissenschaftslehre (Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1934). Parsons describes chapter one of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft as the "most important" explication of Weber's methodological position. See The Structure of Social Action, 1949, p. 579.

[24] Max Weber, "Some categories of interpretive sociology." Translated and edited by Edith Graber. Sociological Quarterly, Vol. 22, 1981, pp. 151-180.

[25] Ibid., p. 152, (original emphasis).

[26] Ibid., p. 152.

"interpretive sociology ... is not part of a 'psychology'."[27] What distinguishes the two is the respective focus of each. While there are intentional or motivational aspects of social action which may be psychological in nature, the analysis of these aspects does not fall within the bounds of sociology. In summarizing Weber's position, Graber writes, "... it is not necessary to understand the psychological motivations of individuals in order to undertake a sociological analysis of action."[28]

> If one were to designate the (subjectively intended) meaning of the action relationship as the "inner side" of human behavior- a questionable figure of speech- only then would one be able to say that interpretive sociology considers each phenomenon exclusively "from the inside out;" this however, does not require enumerating its physical or psychic phenomena.[29]

It is safe to say that, had Parsons examined this essay, he might have interpreted Weber's position regarding the subject matter of interpretive sociology more clearly, and its image might have been more accurate today. For as we have seen, the "subjective meaning" that Weber designates as an essential aspect of social action is actually a shared sense or product of intersubjectivity. It is meaning which is socially constructed.

---

[27] Ibid., p. 154, (emphasis added).

[28] Edith Graber, "Interpretive sociology is not part of psychology." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45, 1975, p. 67.

[29] Max Weber, "Some categories of interpretive sociology," 1981, p.153.

The Experience Called Verstehen

Given Weber's explicit distinction between psychology and interpretive sociology, it should be clear that the method of interpretive sociology, Verstehen, is not at all a psychological method. Nevertheless, to simply say that Verstehen is not a psychological method leaves much to the imagination regarding its nature and status. The classic essay on Verstehen, and the one responsible for the meaning which the term denotes in the minds of most social scientists, was written by Theodore Abel. Ironically, despite the fact that Abel's classic piece has exerted great influence on the meaning of Verstehen within sociology, it does not at all focus its attention on the concept of Verstehen as formulated by Max Weber. Abel mentions Weber only once in the essay, making only a passing reference to him. As a result, even if Abel's rendering of the meaning of Verstehen had been accurate, his interpretation could not be taken to be representative of the concept as it is formulated by Weber. As for his general interpretation of the term, it is now widely agreed that Abel seriously misinterpreted the meaning of Verstehen by construing it as a social-scientific method concerned with motivational analysis. As Munch points out, this rendering of Verstehen has made it "an easy target for a killing argument in the

name of "science" (in the neo-positivist sense)."[30]

In order to understand Weber's conception of Verstehen one must take into account the intellectual climate of his day. Weber matured intellectually during a time of great methodological debate in German social science and the methodological position he was to develop was greatly influenced by the controversy. This debate, known as the Methodenstreit (methodological controversy) was a politically charged debate between the theoretical and historical economists.[31] While the debate was undoubtedly most heated within economic science, the Methodenstreit was actually part of a much larger debate which encompassed all of the social scientific disciplines in the late part of the nineteenth century. The "bone of contention" at the center of the more general debate concerned the relationship between the human or social sciences and the natural or

---

[30] Peter Munch, "'Sense' and 'intention' in Max Weber's theory of social action," 1975, p. 59.

[31] For a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the views of those involved in the Methodenstreit see Mark Joseph Goodman, "Type methodology and type myth: Some antecedents of Max Weber's approach." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45, 1975, pp. 45-58. For a less laborious reading of the controversy and its relevance to Weber see Thomas Burger, Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation: History, Laws, and Ideal Types (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976), pp. 140-150. Weber's own position regarding the issues of the debate are presented in Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics. Translated and edited by G. Oakes. (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1975).

physical sciences.[32] In more common sociological parlance, the debate was between historicism and positivism.

The position of the historical school, represented in the middle of the nineteenth century by Wilhelm Roscher and Karl Knies, and later by Gustav Schmoller, may be summarized as follows.[33] 1) The historical economists argued for an inductive, idiographic method, which aimed to explain economic behavior by way of detailed ethnographic studies. 2) The historians also believed that there are no universal laws of economic behavior, but held that economic development occurs in evolutionary stages. 3) They also emphasized that not all economic behavior is rational, and that its explanation should therefore include data from all aspects of human life. 4) Finally, the economic historians viewed economics as an ethical discipline, and their research was often intended to effect political change.

The position of the theoretical economists, the most famous figure of which was Karl Menger,[34] contrasts with that of the historical school thusly. 1) The theoretical economists followed a deductive, nomothetic method of theory

---

[32] Julian Freund, The Sociology of Max Weber. Translated and by M. Ilford. (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 37.

[33] The organization of this description follows that of J. Turner and L. Beeghley The Emergence of Sociological Theory (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1981) pp. 197-201.

[34] Karl Menger is credited with discovering economic marginal utility theory.

building. 2) While they conceded that economic theory cannot explain every aspect of social action, they argued that it can explain general behavioral patterns common to all societies, and its aim therefore remained the formulation of general economic laws. 3) While they agreed with the historians that human life is extremely detailed and complex, they responded simply by delineating the scope of economic theory narrowly to include only economic behavior, which they viewed as behavior oriented toward the satisfaction of material needs. 4) And finally, they argued that the method of economic analysis must be separated from the political intentions of the researcher; that is, the researcher must refrain from doing research the purpose of which is to support a personal political position.

As Robert John writes, "to the extent that Weber had a methodological 'project' it was to winnow out what was epistemologically valid from each of these positions."[35] Indeed, Weber's response to the Methodenstreit was essentially a selective synthesis of the two competing positions. He agreed that, given the complexity and variations of human history, social scientists cannot rely on their theoretical deduction of general laws, but should instead conceptualize their theoretical propositions from

---

[35] Robert John, "Max Weber's epistemology of the cultural sciences: Presupposition of 'interpretive sociology." The Social Science Journal, Vol. 21 No. 3, July, 1984, p. 91.

descriptive analyses of historical events.[36] This means that unlike his contemporary Simmel, and Schutz who followed, Weber rejects a formal approach to sociology. Regarding the "rationality" of human behavior, Weber conceptualized social action in broad terms, covering both the "rationalist" concerns of the theoretical school, and the "non-rational" concerns of the historical school. Weber's conception of social action took the form of a four-fold typology which spanned from strictly rational (instrumental-rational) action, to non-rational (affectual) action. Regarding the relationship between political values and social research, Weber sided with Menger and the theoretical economists in arguing for a value-free social science.[37]

These conclusions of Weber's and other aspects of his methodological stance may be viewed as the result of the

---

[36] Weber rejected the historians' view of history as a sequence of evolutionary stages.

[37] Weber's view of value-free social science, however, has been distorted and deserves careful analysis. Unfortunately, the value-free question lies beyond the scope of this study. We may at least emphasize that it was in response to science's inherent limitations regarding questions of value that Weber believed that scientists should not issue pronouncements of value. While construed by some as indicating a commitment to a cold and detached, positivistic view of research, Weber's position actually reflects a fundamental critique of scientific method's inherent limitations. In his lecture "Science as a Vocation" Weber quotes Tolstoi in an effort to emphasize science's limitations. See Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., From Max Weber (New York: Oxford Universiy Press, 1958) pp. 129-156.

influence exerted on him by Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert. We will discuss Dilthey's influence on Weber since it represents the closest interpretive sociology has come to direct contact with the hermeneutical tradition.

One of the more direct statements in English regarding Dilthey's influence on Weber appears in H. Stuart Hughes' Consciousness and Society.[38]

> ... one of the perplexing things about Weber's methodological essays is the absence of any sustained analysis of Dilthey's teaching, although the references suggest familiarity with it.[39]

In his long essay on Roscher and Knies, Weber cites Dilthey extensively, referring the reader to numerous works of his, including Dilthey's essay "On the origins of hermeneutics." However, while Weber never wrote a specific commentary on Dilthey, it is clear from these notes that Weber had read his work closely. It should be noted, however, that Weber does not explicitly acknowledge Dilthey's influence on him regarding the method of Verstehen. It may very well be the case that this is because Verstehen, as a methodological concept, pre-dated Dilthey and was used by other contemporaries of Weber, such as Simmel and Droysen.

As we discussed in chapter three, Dilthey believed that the human and natural sciences could be distinguished on the grounds that their respective subject matter were

---

[38] H. Stuart Hughes Consciousness and Society (New York: Knopf, 1958) pp. 309-311.

[39] Ibid., p. 309.

fundamentally different. Owing to this difference, Dilthey argued that the human and natural sciences each require separate and distinct methodologies. Because the subject matter of the natural sciences is factual, its method is one of factual explanation. Because the subject matter of the human sciences is life itself, which is meaningful, its method is one of interpretive-understanding (Verstehen).

This view, however, contrasted sharply with that of Windelband and Rickert.[40] Unlike Dilthey, Rickert did not distinguish human science from natural science on the basis of their respective subject matter. Instead, Rickert "... viewed science as science, whether it it deals with mental, social, or physical phenomena."[41] According to Rickert, the difference between the two pertained not to a difference of subject matter, but rather, to the method they pursued.[42]

Following Dilthey, Weber acknowledges the subjective dimensions of social action and therefore places the

---

[40] Where Dilthey may be considered a neo-idealist, in a Hegelian sense, Rickert and Windelband were neo-Kantians. Rickert was Weber's mentor at Heidelberg.

[41] Don Martindale The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) p. 381.

[42] Describing Rickert's position Goodman writes, "scientific differences were analytic, depending on the criteria which disciplines employed in organizing concepts from primary data." See Goodman "Type methodology and type myth: Some antecedents of Max Weber's approach," 1975, p. 53. A less cryptic statement of Rickert's position is Martindale's: "Nature is all of one piece, but nature may be studied as science or as history, requiring a different formation of concepts in each case." The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory, 1960, p. 379.

importance of meaning at the center of his interpretive sociology. Weber, however, rejects Dilthey's distinction between the human and natural sciences, and like Rickert, views the difference between the two as one of method or concept formation. In defining meaningful social action as interpretive sociology's unit of analysis, Weber was faced with conceptualizing a method capable of grasping the interpretive dimensions of social action. It should be clear, then, that Weber's conceptualization of Verstehen was the result of his critical encounter with the issues of the Methodenstreit, and the related debate between Dilthey and Rickert. By working through these complex and competing positions Weber arrived at a comprehensive, post-positivist, conception of sociology.

In his essay on Roscher and Knies, Weber comments extensively on the concept of Verstehen. In light of our earlier discussion of Heidegger's and Gadamer's radical break from traditional hermeneutics, these comments are remarkable in that they suggest that Weber had himself viewed understanding first as our primary way of relating to the world, and only secondarily as a social scientific method.

In the section of the work entitled "'Understanding' and 'Interpretation' in the Work of Simmel," Weber criticizes Simmel's position on Verstehen and expresses a view compatible with that of Heidegger and Gadamer.

> In Simmel's view, the first form of "understanding" appears only when the issue concerns theoretical knowledge, the presentation of substantive matters in a logical form. Because it is knowledge, it could be verified in exactly the same sense in which it was discovered. This is not quite right. In some cases, the purpose of understanding speech is not to produce a theoretical interpretation, but rather to produce feelings and actions which prove to be immediately "practical."[43]

Weber provides three examples of instances when the purpose of understanding speech is not to produce a theoretical interpretation: "... receipt of and compliance with an order, an appeal to conscience, or an appeal to the value feelings and value judgments of the listener."[44] These are normal events typical of the "subject of real life who desires and evaluates." Weber writes, "'interpretation' in this sense is a thoroughly secondary category, indigenous to the artifical world of science."

> In any case .... the following view seems to me to be erroneous: that this sort of "understanding" is found only in the domain of "objective knowledge." The decisive point is as follows: these cases of "understanding"- the understanding of an order, a question, a claim, an appeal to sympathy, patriotism, etc.- are concerned with a process which takes place within the sphere of the "commitments of everyday life"- if I may employ Munsterberg's terminology, which is quite useful in this context.[45]

It is clear, then, that Weber has an ontological view of quotidian understanding; that is, he views understanding as a practical relation which is pre-thematic and pre-

---

[43] Max Weber, Roscher and Knies, 1975, p. 152.

[44] Ibid., p. 152.

[45] Ibid., p. 153.

methodological. Weber does, however, go on to draw a distinction between ontological understanding, and methodological interpretation, which he views as the method of the sociologist; for Weber writes, "'interpretation' in the sense in which we are concerned with it has nothing to do with this 'quotidian' understanding."[46] Weber thus introduces a categorical distinction between quotidian understanding and sociological interpretation, taking Verstehen to refer to the latter, which he defines as a method comprising both understanding and interpretation. Weber's conception of Verstehen is therefore actually a twofold concept. In specifying this distinction he contrasts erklarendes Verstehen with actuelles Verstehen, which is actually a distinction between explanation and understanding. Actuelles Verstehen, or understanding, refers to the common understanding (quotidian) we all have simply by virtue of our position within a historical-linguistical tradition. This aspect of Verstehen is the primary mode of understanding from which theoretical knowledge is derived. It is that which Weber distinguishes from 'interpretation" in the excerpt from his essay on Roscher and Knies, which we have just discussed. In actuelles Verstehen or common understanding, "meaning is

---

[46] Ibid., pp. 153-154.

immediately apparent;"[47] it therefore does not require any theoretical or thematic modification. But as Weber states throughout his methodological writings, while this type of understanding is necessary, it is not sufficient for the task of sociology. In addition to simply describing what is readily apparent through understanding the interpretive sociologist aims to explain why a particular behavior came about. In order to do this, one must construct analytical concepts and explore their inter-relationships. Strictly speaking, actuelles Verstehen "is concerned with understanding the meaning of a given act."[48] Its goal is to understand what a social actor is doing. By contrast, erklarendes Verstehen is concerned with the reasons behind social action, its "motivation."[49] Its goal is to explain why a social actor has done what he or she has done. Weber's conception of Verstehen is therefore a methodological activity which aims to grasp the what and why of social action and human history.

It is clear, then, that while Weber acknowledges the validity and importance of quotidian understanding, his view of Verstehen is one of a conceptual method which is to be

---

[47] This is the description provided by Dallmayr and McCarthy in the introduction to their discussion of Weber in Understanding and Human Inquiry, 1977, pp. 20-21.

[48] Diana Leat, "Misunderstanding Verstehen." Sociological Review, Vol. 20, 1972 p. 33.

[49] Dallmayr and McCarthy, Understanding and Human Inquiry, 1977, p. 21.

applied to study social action. It is nevertheless the case that Weber shares Heidegger's and Gadamer's view of theoretical knowledge as derivative of understanding, viewing it as something to be used within the "artificial world of science." That this is the case may be further supported by examining Weber's view of concept formation. According to Weber, since reality is manifold and cannot be completely grasped, conceptualization invariably involves the selection of various aspects of reality. Concept formation therefore involves selective choice, and selective choice invariably is influenced according to one's personal values. This means that quotidian understanding is always part of thematized or conceptual understanding.

When Weber's conception is broken down into its constituent parts we must ask, however, in what sense is explanation different from understanding? It is absurd to think that in the realm of everyday life social actors are at a loss when it comes to explaining why someone has done this or that. While it is true that quotidian explanations are often erroneous, this does not warrant their analytical separation from understanding. We will recall that Gadamer's view of the ontological status of understanding involves practical application, that is, the notion that understanding enables us to make practical decisions in everyday life. While Weber must be commended for grasping the constitutive significance of quotidian understanding for

topic selection and concept formation, he errs in his support of the abstract distinction between understanding and explanation.

The main injustice done to Weber's conception of Verstehen stems from the exaggerated emphasis which Parsons and Abel place on erklarendes Verstehen, which is, as we have demonstrated, only one part of Verstehen.

> The conclusion reached by Abel concerning the role of Verstehen in sociological investigation and explanation is based upon an inadequate conception of the notion of Verstehen. Abel conceives of it solely in terms of imputing motivational sequences to actors in given situations. He deals only with what Weber terms erklarendes Verstehen.[50]

As a result of Abel's onesided interpretation of Verstehen, its meaning within sociology has been confused and distorted. The "ruling orthodoxy" regarding the meaning of Verstehen is one which takes it to be a process of empathetic introspection. This view is described by McCarthy as follows.

> Verstehen .... amounts to the heuristic employment of sympathetic imagination in the attempt to interpolate motives into observed behavior sequences. It is not itself a mode of knowledge of social phenomena, nor is it a method of verification. As a heuristic device its functions are to suggest hypotheses and to relieve apprehension in the face of the unfamiliar.[51]

Interestingly, in Abel's most recent reply to his

---

[50] Leat, "Misunderstanding Verstehen," 1972, p. 32.

[51] Thomas McCarthy, "On misunderstanding 'understanding'." Theory and Decision 3, 1973, pp. 353-354.

critics,[52] he acknowledges the fact that his classic critique of the concept of Verstehen had focused on only one of its aspects. He then argues, however, that it was not his intention to write about the "interpretation of meaning," but only, "motivational understanding." He then proposes the following distinction.

> I propose that we draw a distinction between the two major areas covered by the German meaning of the term Verstehen as follows: We designate motivational understanding as Verstehen I, and the interpretation of meaning as Verstehen II. It is then immediately clear ... that I deal with Verstehen I, while Winch and Gadamer deal with Verstehen II.[53]

Abel goes on to claim that what Winch and Gadamer say about Verstehen II "does not contradict what I have said about Verstehen I; and that, furthermore, my commitment to the points I made about Verstehen I does not prevent me from acknowledging the validity and importance of the points they make about Verstehen II.[54]

However, while it is encouraging that Abel acknowledges that "Verstehen I ... would not be possible without Verstehen II,"[55] he is incorrect in assuming that this does not contradict his present view of Verstehen I, for the very fact that he dichotomizes Verstehen along the lines of the

---

[52] Theodor Abel "Verstehen I and Vertsehen II." Theory and Decision, Vol. 6, 1975, pp. 99-102.

[53] Ibid., p. 99.

[54] Ibid., p. 99.

[55] Ibid., p. 100.

traditional distinction between understanding and explanation indicates that he continues to misunderstand the nature of understanding and interpretation. In light of Gadamer's hermeneutics it makes little sense to draw a distinction between two parts of what is esssentially the same process. Even to suggest discussing one as separate from the other is therefore problematic, regardless of the words one weaves about the function and purpose of each. In addition, by overlooking Weber's comprehensive conception of Verstehen Abel fails to grasp that Verstehen is not a psychological process involving empathy. Moreover, where Gadamer, and also Weber, view personal experience as the condition of the "operation," Abel mistakenly construes it as an obstacle to scientific understanding. In Weber's view, the "scientific" implications of the constitutive significance of personal experience for concept formation simply mean that the process itself is value-laden. Abel makes the traditional mistake of viewing personal experience as having a "contaminating" effect on the "objective" status of the scientist. More importantly, however, is Abel's blindness regarding the relationship between what he terms Verstehen I and Verstehen II, which are not at all separate and distinct phenomena but instead are part of human experience itself. The operation called Verstehen is not an operation at all, but an experience.

We may now summarize Weber's view of interpretive

sociology and compare it to Gadamer's hermeneutics. According to Weber, the aim of interpretive sociology is to understand and explain the meaning of social action. Social action is meaningful, not in a psychological sense, but in the sense that it takes place within a social context which is itself meaningful. What makes the social context or world meaningful is that within it we are related to other human beings and our action takes into account their behavioral expectations. This "taking into account" is not a psychological operation, but the general sense provided by our experience of social relations. Social reality is therefore constituted through interpretive social action; and this means that the role played by understanding and interpretation is of central importance to sociology. It also means that Gadamer's analysis of the nature of interpretation may be pursued for the light it may be able to shed on the constitution of social reality.

While Weber conceives Verstehen as a methodological operation, a close examination[56] reveals that he views the method of Verstehen as a derivative of a more primary mode of understanding which is part of our common experience. That this is the case can be further supported through reference to Weber's "value-relation" notion. It is because methodological explanation always involves understanding

---

[56] The "close examination" to which I refer is our discussion of his comments presented in his work on Roscher and Knies.

that values are acknowledged by Weber to be implicit in the act of concept building. During the process of constructing ideal-types for purposes of explanation, the researcher must select certain characteristics of phenomena and ignore others. The criteria guiding such decisions are not scientific but instead result from one's own common sense and value-orientation. The value-ladenness of concept formation is therefore inescapable, just as interpretation is always laden by prejudices. The fundamental difference between Weber and Gadamer is that Weber views prejudices as limiting while Gadamer views them as enabling.

Weber wanted to study social action, and he viewed this as a scientific endeavor. He did not study the nature of interpretation, but, following Dilthey, identified interpretation as an essential part of social action. That his emphasis regarding the nature of interpretation fell largely on its importance for matters methodological is understandable in light of the intellectual climate of his day. Our study of Weber's conception of interpretation does not support the view that Weber required of sociologists a "controlled distanciation," as it is sometimes called; the belief that we can suspend our quotidian biases a la Descartes. This is as much an impossibility in the work of Weber as it is in the work of Gadamer. Nevertheless, it is true that Weber had a strictly methodological view of hermeneutics owing to his rationalist view of the

constitutive effect of one's values or prejudices, and this sets him apart fundamentally from Gadamer. In addition, it is interesting that in spite of the importance which Weber attributes to quotidian understanding, both in the context of the construction of social action and the process of concept formation, Weber does not concentrate on studying the interpretive dimensions of social action so much as he concentrates on the interpretive dimensions of doing sociology. Moreover, he never took upon himself the task of studying the nature of interpretation itself. As we will now see, this task became the central concern of Alfred Schutz.

Alfred Schutz and the Phenomenology of the Social World

Weber's project of developing an interpretive sociology was taken up and further developed by Alfred Schutz. It is Schutz's contention that while Weber correctly identified the subject matter of interpretive sociology, he failed to rigorously ground such key concepts as "meaning" and "action." Schutz's project therefore takes as its task the philosophical grounding of interpretive sociology. To do this, he draws heavily on the phenomenological writings of Edmund Husserl. However, as we shall see, his decision to ground interpretive sociology in strict phenomenology is problematic, for it leads him to a reductionist (subjectivist) conception of interpretive experience.

In the most systematic statement of his project[57] Schutz states that his study is the result of "an intensive concern of many years' duration with the theoretical writings of Max Weber."[58] Schutz's point of departure is the notion that

---

[57] Alfred Schutz's most comprehensive statement of his work is found in The Phenomenology of the Social World, translated by George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1967, originally published in German in 1932).

[58] Ibid., p. xxxi. It should be noted, however, that while Schutz describes his familiarity with Weber as an "intensive concern," he bases his assessment of Weber's position exclusively on Economy and Society, ignoring the early essays which have already been demonstrated to be of crucial importance. Nevertheless, in so far as Schutz's critique of Weber focuses for the most part on what Weber did not concern himself with, this shortcoming does not appear to have serious consequences for Schutz's study.

Weber's conception of subjective meaning calls for theoretical scrutiny, for as Weber left the concept, "it was little more than a heading for a number of important problems which he did not examine in detail, even though they were hardly foreign to him."[59] Schutz points out that while Weber is correct in identifying the subject matter of sociology as meaningful social action, he fails to study precisely what meaningful social action is.

> It is at this point that the theoretical limitations of Weber become evident. He breaks off his analysis of the social world when he arrives at what he assumes to be the basic and irreducible elements of social phenomena. But he is wrong in his assumption. His concept of the meaningful act of the individual- the key idea of interpretive sociology- by no means defines a primitive, as he thinks it does. It is, on the contrary, a mere label for a highly complex and ramified area that calls for much further study.[60]

There is no question that Schutz is correct in this point regarding the limitations of Weber's conception of meaningful social action. While Weber distinguishes "intended meaning" from "objectively knowable meaning" he fails to explain 1) the constitution of meaning in the individual, 2) and the modification of meaning by social actors.[61] In essence, Weber fails to examine the nature of interpretation itself. It is revealing of Schutz's

---

[59] Ibid., p. xxxi.

[60] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[61] What Weber does not do with respect to the process of interpretation is listed rather lengthily by Schutz on page 8 of The Phenomenology of the Social World. We will discuss only the most important of these in our discussion.

intentions that he accuses Weber of "naively" taking for granted the "meaningful phenomena of the social world as a matter of intersubjective agreement in precisely the same way as we all in daily life assume the existence of a lawful external world conforming to the concepts of our understanding."[62] Through this observation Schutz stumbles upon an aspect of social action that had thus far eluded sociological scrutiny. This aspect is the taken-for-granted nature of knowledge in everyday life.

Schutz points out that Weber's oversight of the importance of the nature of interpretation and meaning is understandable because such concerns are typically taken for granted by all of us. However, when such assumptions are taken-for-granted by the social scientist they have a way of "taking their revenge." It is imperative, therefore, that the social scientist inquire into such matters. This leads Schutz to a more primary point, however, for if social phenomena are constituted in part by commen-sense concepts, it is clear that it will not do for sociology to abstain from a scientific examination of these "self-evident" ideas.[63] This point is crucial, for it means that not only must sociologists study their own taken for granted assumptions but they must study the taken-for-granted assumptions that constitute meaning in social action itself.

---

[62] Ibid., p. 9.

[63] Ibid., p. 9.

This is to be done by studying the nature of the interpretive procedures constitutive of understanding. This is truly Schutz's most important contribution to interpretive sociology, for it shifts its focus from meaningful social action to interpretation itself. The significance of this should not be taken lightly. Summarizing Schutz's move, Bauman states

> it is our interpretive activity which gives us the real understanding of whatever we experience. Hence the proper subject-matter of an 'understanding' sociology ... is the study of interpretive procedures in which meanings are being established in the world of everyday life. This is a statement of truly revolutionary consequences ... They mean nothing less than a radical redistribution of roles assigned to the various units constituting a sociological discourse.[64]

Instead of attempting to discover the meaning in social behavior, Schutz directs us instead to focus on the interpretive construction of meaning. While in defining meaningful social action as interpretive sociology's unit of analysis, Weber acknowledges the importance of interpretation. His examination of interpretation is generally limited to the interpretive-methodological concerns of the sociologist. Schutz re-directs the attention of interpretive sociology away from its own methodological preoccupations toward the study of interpretation in society at large. This move is supported

---

[64] Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978, p. 180. Bauman also draws a parallel between Heidegger's and Schutz's respective views of the constitutive importance of understanding for experience.

by the argument that the reality constructed on the basis of the interpretations of social actors is more important than the interpretation of that reality within sociology. After all, argues Schutz, the structuring of society is more primarily related to the social construction of reality, not to the sociological construction of what has already been constructed. This is, perhaps, the most important aspect of Schutz's work for our purposes, for it helps clear the way for establishing the sociological study of prejudices and hermeneutical reflection throughout society itself.

In the course of his analysis Schutz concludes that interpretation has a taken-for-granted nature. That is, we live in a routinized world and, in the words of Bauman, "routine does not occasion analysis."[65] We expect things to conform to our expectations of them and they usually do. We typically have no reason to question reality and our interpretation of it, so both are typically left unquestioned. This view parallels Mead's thoughts on reflectivity, which we discussed in chapter two. It is only when we have a reason to question our assumptions of reality that we actually do so. In Mead, such reasons are exclusively pragmatic: we reflect in order to conceptualize an alternative course of behavior in an effort to overcome obstacles blocking the attainment of a particular goal. With regard to the requisites for questioning our

---

[65] Ibid., p. 177.

assumptions of reality Schutz's view is funadamentally the same as Mead's.

> The taken-for-granted (das Fraglos-gegeben) is always that particular level of experience which presents itself as not in need of further analysis. Whether a level of experience is thus taken for granted depends on the pragmatic interest of the reflective glance which is directed upon it.[66]

The taken-for-granted nature of interpretive experience suggests that social reality is constructed conventionally, that is, constructed according to how it has been constructed in the absence of any pragmatic reason to construct it otherwise. This theoretical insight has found empirical support through the efforts of ethnomethodology.[67] While Schutz's work is exclusively philosophical, in Garfinkel we find a commitment to the empirical study of the interpretive practices which Schutz formally identifies. The importance of ethnomethodology, for our purposes, is simply that it provides empirical evidence for the theoretical insight that social action is typically guided by tacit meanings, interpretive assumptions generally unchallenged in daily life, and the fact that the

---

[66] Schutz, The Phenomenology of the Social World, 1967, p. 74.

[67] Following Schutz's emigration to the United States his ideas began to influence American sociologists, the most famous being a student of Talcott Parsons named Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel drew from Schutz, and later from the natural language philosophers, to pioneer the movement known as ethnomethodology. While ethnomethodology was developed by an American and has been influenced by the analytic philosophy, its roots lie principally within the German tradition.

interruption of routine is met by a determined effort to re-establish a sense of conventionality or normalcy. This insight is particularly significant when considered in light of Gadamer's notion of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. For if our interpretations are typically taken-for-granted and assumed to be true barring any "pragmatic interest" or practical reason to view them otherwise, then the prejudices constitutive of experience are likely to be left alone and unquestioned. This means that social reality is likely to be constituted by a considerable amount of false prejudices that are typically left unchallenged. We will explore the significance of this in our final chapter and more closely contrast Garfinkel's project with that of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

So far we have focused on the accomplishments of Schutz's work for the forwarding of interpretive sociology. These accomplishments, however, are tainted by a number of theoretical shortcomings. While these shortcomings do not undermine the Schutzian insights we have already discussed, they do severely limit the application of his more general theory to the study of interpretation within sociology. We will begin our discussion of Schutz's theoretical deficiencies by discussing his point of departure and the grounding of his theory in the work of Edmund Husserl.

In order to clear the way for interpretive sociology's new task Schutz believes he must first examine the nature of

interpretation through rigorous philosophical analysis. In Schutz' work, this analysis takes the form of phenomenological analysis in a strict Husserlian sense. As we shall see, Schutz's move to follow Husserl leads him into an analysis of interpretation which is subjective and solipistic; and this proves devastating for his project as a whole.

As Zeitlin points out, the meaning of the term "phenomenology" is ambiguous and unclear within sociology.[68] Let us therefore begin by attempting to de-mystify the term. Husserl used the term to denote a rigorous method of analysis which he believes could provide an ultimate foundation for both science and philosophy. He realized, like Descartes before him, that our consciousness contains many ideas which are uninvited; ideas resulting from common experience, enculturation, and the like. Husserl believed that through radical reflection we can put aside or "bracket" such ideas, thereby enabling us to see the essence of things themselves aside from their immediate appearance.

The term phenomenology as it is typically used nowadays does not refer to this strict Husserlian formulation, and the notion of "bracketing" our historicity is generally written off as an absurdity. Phenomenology instead refers to a general method whereby the researcher seeks to move

---

[68] See Irving Zeitlin's chapter on phenomenology in Rethinking Sociology: A Critique of Contemporary Theory (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

beyond the immediate appearance of things by describing their underlying history. Gadamer's approach in Truth and Method may be termed "phenomenological" in so far as he inquires into the meaning of linguistical concepts by describing the historical conditions underlying their development.[69] In this manner he is able to go beyond, or "transcend" the immediate appearance of such concepts as "prejudice" and "authority." This is the general sense in which the term phenomenology is now typically used.

In Husserl's later work the common world of appearances within which we all reside is termed the Lebenswelt, or life-world. The life-world is that which constitutes our natural attitude or world-view. In order to do "science" Husserl believed that the life-world must be bracketed, for he believed that the ideas and notions it contains would contaminate the objective discernment of reality which is science's aim. Schutz, however, reverses this formula. Sociologists, rather than "bracketing" the life-world, must instead take it as their object of study, for the content of life-worlds are constitutive of social action. In summarizing Schutz's conception of the life-world, Bauman writes, "the life-world ... includes everything which is taken-for-granted, and normally not reflected upon, in the

---

[69] Gadamer, in fact, describes his approach as phenomenological in the preface to Truth and Method.

attitude of common sense."[70] Brockelman describes the life-world as the "unquestioned, unformulated, preconceptual and naively-accepted context (which exists) behind and before any and all discursive or symbolic representations of it."[71] The life-world, which for Husserl is an "obstacle' to scientific research, becomes in Schutz the central focus of sociological analysis.

It should be clear, then, why Schutz terms his interpretive sociology "phenomenological," for he views its aim as the description of the interpretive procedures which provide us with our life-world, which consists of the taken-for-granted knowledge of everyday life. Phenomenological sociology therefore involves the descriptive illumination of the structure of our interpretation of reality. It should be emphasized that Schutz is not concerned with the meaning-content of these interpretive procedures, but rather, with the structural or formal procedures themselves. His concern is thus a formal and abstract one, incapable of providing insight into the nature and truth status of prejudices. We will come back to this point later in our discussion.

That Schutz is on target in his general intentions

---

[70] Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978, p. 175.

[71] Paul T. Brockelman, Existential Phenomenology and the World of Ordinary Experience: An Introduction, 1980, p. 47.

regarding Husserl is generally agreed. By inverting Husserl's position regarding the life-world Schutz succeeds in establishing the central importance of common-knowledge for interpretive sociology. However, while Schutz rejects Husserl's pejorative view of the life-world, he nevertheless follows Husserl's conceptualization regarding its transcendental constitution, and this is crucial.

In Husserl's view, the life-world is transcendentally constituted in internal time consciousness. What does this mean? According to Husserl, because we exist in time we can only consciously perceive the meaning of an experience by looking back, if you will, toward the stream and flow of experiences. In Schutz's words, we exist in a "flow of duration" during which time "we encounter only undifferentiated experiences that melt into one another in a flowing continuum."[72] Through reflection, however, we are able to distinguish among experiences and perceive elapsed experiences as objects of attention. But this means that we do not actually perceive the present as meaningful; only that which has already passed. In Schutz's words,

> only the already experienced is meaningful, not that which is being experienced. For meaning is merely an operation of intentionality, which, however, only becomes visible to the reflective glance.[73]

---

[72] Schutz, The Phenomenology of the Social World, 1967, p. 51. Schutz's notion of duration is taken over from Bergson.

[73] Ibid., p. 52.

How, then, does the elapsed experience that escapes the light of reflection come to be part of our biography, part of our life-world? According to Husserl, our actual behavior, as it is taking place, is perceived by us as "prephenomenal"[74] experience and this perception is provided by what Husserl terms "internal time-consciousness." Internal time-consciousness thus refers to the subjective and transcendental constitution of prephenomenal experience, our ability to perceive experience as it occurs prior to consciously reflecting upon it. This means that the perception of reality as a tangible flow, rather than a maddening barrage of stimuli, is provided by our internal time-consciousness. Internal time-consciousness is therefore responsible for constituting, pre-refectively or pre-consciously, the life-world and the identity of the individual. This means that the life-world and the identity of the individual are both subjectively constituted. This is why, in Schutz' view, each of us has his/her own life-world. Society is therefore a plurality of life-worlds, plural, and reality the sum of prephenomenal perception and its conscious appropriation.

In light of Gadamer's hermeneutics, Schutz's adoption of Husserl's view of the subjective and transcendental constitution of experience is extremely problematic. First, by following Husserl in viewing life-worlds as subjectively

---

[74] Ibid., p. 56.

constituted, Schutz in effect purges interpretation of its inherently social, linguistical, and historical dimensions. This has devastating consequences for his more general view of interpretive sociology. His failure to account for the inherently social nature of interpretation leaves his notions of "typifications" and "stocks of knowledge" as little more than abstract, disembodied concepts. When one constitutes one's own world of meaning then we have to wonder what becomes of intersubjectivity and society in general. The nature of intersubjectivity is a question which Schutz cannot adequately answer.

This shortcoming has been emphasized by a number of thinkers and has often been viewed as sufficient cause for rejecting other aspects of Schutz's approach to interpretive sociology. Perinbanayagam, for example, sets out to discover the "other" in Schutz's work, but comes up empty.

> The other is perceived as an entity but it does not seem to want to participate in any joint action, in the creation of the social act, in the arrival at a common definition of selves and situations. In fact, the nature of the entity doing the perceiving of the other's activities is left a total mystery: it is said to be constituting the other as well as the world, but who and how it was constituted and sustained is never made clear. It appears to be a Schutzian a priori, thus denying the validity of the processes of socialization and the self as a social and interpersonal emergent.[75]

Perinbanayagam echoes here a common criticism of Schutz, one which attacks him for viewing the subject as an isolated

---

[75] Robert S. Perinbanayagam, Signifying Acts, 1985, p. 139.

ego; an ego which does not co-exist in a social situation so much as it exists in a state of detached co-presence.

Perinbanayagam sums up his criticism of Schutz as follows.

> The monads in Schutz's world indeed have windows, but they are equipped with one-way mirrors that let them look out but do not let any light in.[76]

Giddens' criticism of Schutz is not much more sympathetic. Giddens writes that Schutz's work

> retains the umbilical tie to the subjectivity of the ego .... and makes no attempt at all to confront the residual problem of intersubjectivity in his exegesis of Husserl's writings.[77]

Moreover, Giddens criticizes Schutz for dwelling on the "conditions" of action while ignoring the "consequences" of action. Giddens attributes this to Schutz's overly abstract and formalistic approach. Schutz's descriptions are generally theoretical deductions derived from Husserl's philosophy. As such they are <u>formal</u> constructs which contain only a distant echo of the ontological and historical facticity of social action. In Bauman's view

> Schutz's sociology takes the same stance toward social world as Kant took toward knowledge in general: it wants to cogitate the conditions under which any object may acquire its 'whatness,' or any cultural fact may attain its individuality.[78]

This means that Schutz is not at all concerned with specific

---

[76] Ibid., p. 143.

[77] Giddens, <u>New Rules of Sociological Method</u>, 1976, p. 31.

[78] Bauman, <u>Hermeneutics and Social Science</u>, 1978, p. 187.

historical and social events or meanings. It is a strictly formal approach to the structure of interpretation. Being formalistic, Schutz's concepts are incapable of supporting analyses into the meaning of power and domination. The fate of his sociology is therefore one of sterility and political impotence. In The Phenomenology of the Social World Schutz re-affirms the importance of Weber's call for a value-free sociology, but apparently mistakes Weber's position to mean that one should not study matters of real importance. In going beyond Weber to provide a philosophical foundation for interpretive sociology, Schutz never returns, remaining instead within a Husserlian world of abstract ideas.

Not all theorists, however, believe that Schutz's following of Husserl is problematic. Martindale, for example, sees no problem with Schutz's adoption of Husserl's transcendental ego, and in fact, claims that Schutz actually escapes the solipism of Husserl. While it may be true that, on a technical-philosophical level Schutz has failed to account for the inherently social nature of interpretive experience, Martindale is willing to excuse Schutz's failure on the grounds that what Schutz has left out needs no accounting for.

> In following Weber's lead, Schutz avoided Husserl's problem of solipsism. If we retain the natural attitude as people among people, the existence of others is no more questionable to us than the existence

of an outer world.[79]

Martindale thus suggests that, given the fact that that which is in question, our inherent sociality, is obvious to all, the critique of Schutz which we have discussed is an exaggeration. But what is at issue here is not whether one tends to question the existence of the other, but rather, the question of the constitutive importance of one for the understanding of another. In Schutz the presence of the other has only minimal importance. Given the formal nature of his view of individual consciousness, Schutz describes intersubjectivity as a state of parallel consciences, all of which assume the others to have the same basic mechanism with which to view reality. This is contrasted with the work of Mead, whom we will discuss shortly, who views the presence of the other as necessary to the formation of the self and its interpretation. In Gadamer, our understanding is defined in terms of our practical social relations and participation in a linguistic tradition. Gadamer, therefore, like Mead, views history as constitutive of biography; society as constitutive of personality.

In our view Schutz's failure to account for the inherent sociality of individuals is problematic not because it suggests poor scholarship or a lack of creativity, but because it is incapable of furthering our goal of

---

[79] Don Martindale, The Nature and Types of Sociological Method (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) p. 584.

establishing the practical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics. We exist in a world of incredible cultural and social diversity. In such a world it is the semantical and experiential differences and similarities that matter; not the fact that we all begin and end our existence, for all intents and purposes, with the same cognitive mechanism. But it is with a cognitive mechanism that Schutz's concerns lie. Such concerns are for psychologists and biologists. The same criticism pertains to Habermas, who prefers to ponder the "apparatus" and formal structure of language rather than study its content and the prejudices which it carries. However, it is our bias that sociologists must concern themselves with the differences that make a difference, such as the social distribution of true and false prejudices, and the social stratification of opportunities to reflect hermeneutically. Schutz's formalistic descriptions of the function of schematized knowledge, and Habermas' concern over communicative competence therefore offer us precious little. The same is true of ethnomethodology, which may be described as a radical empirical project based on Schutz's sociology of knowledge. Ethnomethodology is equally formalistic, vacuous and politically impotent.[80] In the words of Bauman,

---

[80] See Giddens' discussion of ethnomethodology in New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976. See also Bauman's discussion of the development of ethnomethodology in Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978.

people begin to feel the need to understand when their intentions are defied and hopes dashed. The demand to understand arises from the hopelessness experienced when the meaning of human plight is opaque and the reason for suffering impenetrable. Schutz's detailed explanation why such an opacity is a transcendental condition of the life-world helps as much as a painstaking description of the technology of making nooses helps the convict overcome his fear of the gallows.[81]

---

[81] Bauman, Hermeneutics and Social Science, 1978, p. 193.

Interactionism and George Herbert Mead

The American strain of interpretive sociology is an outgrowth of a social-philosophical movement known as interactionism. This movement paralleled the growth of pragmatism and emerged from the work of William James, John Dewey, James Baldwin, W. I. Thomas and others. Among this group, however, the most influential thinker for American interpretive sociology is George Herbert Mead. His primary influence is attributed to the fact that 1) many of his students at the University of Chicago later became successful and influential sociologists and 2) his teachings and unpublished writings were put together in book form at a time when much of interactionism was still very much an oral tradition.[82]

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was one of four primary figures of the American philosophical movement known as "pragmatism." The term "pragmatism" was coined by Charles Sanders Peirce to denote a practical approach to questions of truth and mind. Like his fellow pragmatists, Mead viewed mind not as an entity or object, but as a process. In this sense Mead is similar to Hegel. Mead's approach was in fact a synthesis of Hegelian and Darwinian ideas, and he ultimately came to view the emergence of mind or

---

[82] This second point is made by Manford Kuhn in his essay "Major trends in symbolic interaction in the past twenty-five years." Sociological Quarterly, Vol. 5, 1964, pp. 61-84.

consciousness as an adaptive response to a difficult natural environment. In Mead's view, mind provides humans with an advantage in that it enables us to manipulate our environment in abstract and complex ways. To Mead, then, mind is an extremely important process which enables us to change and shape the world we live in by enabling us to make decisions regarding behavioral choices.

Although Mead was first and foremost a philosopher, his work has had a great impact on sociology. Mead taught a seminar in social-psychology at the University of Chicago at a time when American sociology was becoming an important and popular field of study (approximately 1905-1930), and many graduate students of sociology attended his seminar, which over the years had become famous. His teachings thus proved seminal for the development of American sociology as many of his students went on to become influential sociologists.

Mead never published a book. However, following his death a number of his graduate students put together collections of his lecture notes and, with the help of the University of Chicago, published four volumes of his ideas and theoretical contributions.[83] Among these works, the most widely read by far has been Mind, Self and Society.

---

[83] In addition to Mind, Self and Society and The Philosophy of the Act, see The Philosophy of the Present, ed. Arthur E. Murphy (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932); and Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Merritt H. Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936).

This work contains Mead's classic theoretical contribution to sociology. This contribution pertains to sociology's central question: how are we to conceptualize the relationship between the individual and society? That is, how can we understand the relationship between our personal lives and action, and the larger historical or social forces which affect them? In order to answer this question Mead would have to explain the nature of mind and its relationship to social behavior.

In Mead's day the analysis of mind fell within the province of psychology, which was dominated at that time by behaviorism. Mead's task thus took the form of social-psychology; his point of departure being the work of Watson. The behaviorists viewed the mind as a black box, as a mystery the contents of which could not be studied scientifically. Owing to this view of mind behaviorists sought to explain psychological processes in terms of <u>stimulus</u> and <u>response</u>. To Mead, however, this view was unacceptable. He sought to explain the function of mind in terms of its ability to help us overcome problems experienced in everyday life. But before Mead could explore the function of mind, he would first have to explain its emergence. Mead accomplished this by drawing a connection between <u>mind</u> and <u>language</u>. According to Mead, language and mind are synonomous. With the emergence of language comes the ability to think, to manipulate conscious objects. In

Meadian terms, language is a system of shared "significant symbols." Words are significant symbols in that they "call out in the other the same response that they call out in me." That is, what makes language possible is the fact that words are significations of meanings which are shared.

How does Mead know this? According to Mead, when we speak we are not merely a speaker, but at the same time, also a listener. As a listener we monitor and edit our expressions according to the expectations of the other person. It is not necessarily the case that we say what the listener wants to hear, but say what we want the listener to hear in a way we assume will be understandable, based on our own expectations of understanding. Speaking, therefore, invariably includes implicitly-shared assumptions about the expectations of others. We may say, then, that in Mead's view the existence of language is itself proof of the inherently social nature of individual selves. Because we express ourselves in terms of the expectations of others, our experience is constituted socially, if for no other reason than the fact that we have already considered our relations to others before we act. It should be clear that where Schutz fails owing to his Husserlian view of the subject, Mead succeeds fabulously by viewing linguistic intersubjectivity as the very condition of consciousness.

Mead's formula is not all that different from Durkheim's notion of how social facts are constitutive of social

solidarity. Unlike Durkheim, however, Mead does not view communicative conformity to the symbolic representations of the group as the result of external coercion. Mead instead views symbolic interaction as a creative process of negotiation; a process during which time the expectations themselves exist in a state of flux, ready to be mediated through the creative manipulation of individuals. In comparison to Weber, in Mead's view it is not only that we take into account the behavior of others and orient our action accordingly, but that the other and society at large has already structured our experience preconsciously in terms of the linguistical concepts which we use. Another way of saying this that social structure is within all of us in the form of language.

This interpretation of Mead focuses on an aspect of his work which has not received a tremendous amount of attention. Generally, when commentators explain Mead's theory of sociality, his notion that our conscious experience is socially constituted, they typically do so by referring to Mead's thoughts on play and social learning. In Mind, Self and Society Mead discusses the importance of the function of play, and uses the play metaphor to explain his celebrated notion of "taking the role of the other." In his learning model of socialization, children through imaginary and real play learn to assume different social and occupational roles. By assuming these roles they thus

internalize the normative expectations of society. As adults, people thus are able to, unreflectively and habitually, take the role of the "generalized other"; the "generalized other" being a broad term used by Mead to denote the general norms which people implicitly refer to when they construct their acts. It follows from these ideas that we become social creatures through socialization, a rather reasonable argument. It is our view that the former explanation of sociality, an explanation which must be teased out of Mead's wider discussion of language, is superior to the latter because it focuses its attention at a more primary level of analysis.

While Mead constructs an impressive theory of the emergence of mind, and provides us with an explanation of the inherent sociality of human existence, he does not, however, focus his attention specifically on the interpretive process. In The Philosophy of the Act Mead comes closest to discussing interpretive experience by constructing a theory of the "act." The focus of Mead's discussion falls on the importance of "reflectivity" for the construction and modification of behavior. We outlined the important points of Mead's theory in chapter two, and will therefore proceed with only a brief description of Mead's view of reflectivity.

As we have seen, Mead views reflection as a response to problematic situations, a problematic situation being one in

which an impulse has been frustrated. It was our contention that this is an unacceptable rendering of the condition necessary for reflection, for it reduces reflection to an instrumental process. The impulse which gives rise to reflectivity stems from an experience of frustration resulting from the inability to realize a particular goal. In Mead's view reflection, therefore, serves an exclusively pragmatic function. By contrast, the impetus to hermeneutical reflection, in Gadamer's view, stems from a frustrated understanding, a feeling of incompleteness regarding the meaning of something experienced. Unless it is one's conscious intention to achieve a certain quality of understanding in a given situation, Mead's view of reflection is incapable of explaining the experience of hermeneutical reflection. Hence, it breaks down when faced with answering questions regarding the interpretation of meaning and value. Again, as we stated earlier, this does not undermine Mead's philosophy of the act but simply identifies its definite limitations regarding questions of meaning, understanding and interpretation. It is understandable, given Mead's concerns and the intellectual climate of his day, that he would develop a social-behaviorist view of reflection which has functionalist overtones.[84]

---

[84] Andrew J. Reck actually describes Mead's project as an "offshoot of functional psychology," Selected Writings (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964) p. xvi.

It would clearly be problematic to reduce interactionism to the work of G. H. Mead, and those who have suggested as much have been severely criticized.[85] Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, beyond the contribution of Mead's theory of sociality, the American tradition has little to offer to us, given our narrow concern over the nature of interpretation. This is partly so because much of the American interpretive-sociological tradition has simply hashed and rehashed Mead's ideas, rather than applying them in new ways to new questions. This is perhaps most true in the case of Herbert Blumer, a disciple of Mead who coined the term "symbolic interactionism." Blumer has spent much effort reiterating Mead's formulations, and defending his interpretations when they have been called into question. Manford Kuhn, on the other hand, established an empirical school of symbolic interactionism at Iowa and spent his efforts subjecting Mead's specific theoretical insights to empirical tests. Concerned either with expounding (Blumer) or testing (Kuhn) Mead's formulations, symbolic interactionists and their followers have focused mainly on interaction and not interpretation. This is true of others

---

[85] For example, see Berenice M. Fisher and Anselm L. Strauss "Interactionism," in Tom Bottomore and Robert Nisbet, eds., A History of Sociological Analysis (New York: Basic, 1978), pp. 457-498.

who have been influenced by Mead, such as the dramaturgists.[86] This is not to say that at a later point, when we have studied the nature of interpretation and find ourselves in a position to begin applying our findings to the question of the relationship between interpretation and social action, we will not be able to benefit greatly from the American interactionist tradition. The work of Goffman, for example, would appear to offer us much in the way of linking interpretation to social action. It is simply that at this point the question of interaction is of secondary importance given our central concern over the question of the nature of interpretation.

Having said this we may cite a contribution of an early interactionist, W. I. Thomas, which is directly relevant to our immediate study. This contribution is Thomas' notion of the "definition of the situation."[87] The "definition of the situation" is used by Thomas to denote the fact that reality is constructed through the interpretive or definitional activity of individuals in situations.

> Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a ... <u>definition of the situation</u> ...

---

[86] Dramaturgy refers to those who follow the lead of Kenneth Burke, who drew upon Mead to conceptualize a theory of cultural criticism.

[87] As Buckley points out, there exists several variations of Thomas' notion, such as MacIver's "dynamic assessment" and Znaniecki's "humanistic coefficient." However, Thomas' notion appears superior to these variations if only because it is clear and direct. <u>Sociology and Modern Systems Theory</u>, 1967, pp. 17-23.

> Gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions.[88]

This notion enables us to speak in specific terms of the myriad interpretive experiences that collectively comprise the social construction of reality. The notion that every "self-determined" act emerges in terms of an interpretation of the meaning of an immediate situation is compatible with Gadamer's view that experience itself is interpretive or hermeneutical. We must be careful, however, to keep in mind that such definitions or interpretations are constituted preconsciously in understanding. This is not something which is typically taken into account by interactionists, who generally tend to exaggerate the reflective autonomy of the individual vis-a-vis history and tradition.

We may now summarize our discussion of interpretive sociology and its relevance to our task of establishing the sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics. From our discussion of Mead we have gained the notion that individuals are inherently social, owing to the constitutive importance of implicitly shared linguistical meanings. This is important for it enables us to inpute into Schutz's sterile view of interpretive procedures breathing, socially

---

[88] W. I. Thomas, quoted in Martindale, The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory, 1988, p. 326. The original passage is found in W. I. Thomas, The Unadjusted Girl (Boston: Little, Brown, 1923), p. 42. We will make use of Thomas' notion of the 'definition of the situation' when we specify the theoretical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics in our final chapter.

constituted, human beings. The life-world thus becomes a social-world personal not in the sense that it is self-constituted, but individually experienced. The social-world, social reality itself, thus becomes the basis of that which is taken-for-granted and typically assumed. We have also learned from Schutz that it is to the meanings constitutive of the social-world that sociologists should turn their attention for these meanings play a bigger role in the construction of social reality than the interpretations of reality provided by sociologists. Incorporating Garfinkel's contribution, we may say that social reality is conventionally constructed and when the conventions of reality are interrupted, the typical reaction is to attempt to repair reality and return it to a state of normalcy. This means that not only is the social world of meaning which constitutes reality taken-for-granted, but that we have a vested interest in keeping it this way. In other words, we have an aversion to bringing into question the prejudices constitutive of interpretive experience. These insights will guide our effort to establish the sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics, which is the focus of our final chapter.

CHAPTER VII

THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

We began our study concerned with the inability of sociology to provide the theoretical direction necessary for answering questions pertaining to the general phenomenon of interpretation. Our point of departure was a case study of Milford, New Hampshire. Our question was one which sought to understand how it was that a considerable number of residents there had come to interpret water healthy and safety issues to be no more important than routine-town business, after having experienced a local water crisis. Prior to being surveyed, Milfordians had lost close to half of their water supply due to toxic waste contamination. In addition to the inconvenience caused by the contamination, Milford residents had also been subjected to health risks the significance of which may take years to surface.

We attempted to answer this question by applying G. H. Mead's thoughts on reflective thinking. It was argued that within the interpretive-sociological literature, Mead's writings on reflection held the most promise for addressing the question we had posed. Following Mead, we hypothesized that some Milfordians did not come to view water health and safety issues as more important than routine-town business

because they either 1) failed to view the contamination episode as a problematic situation in the first place (and therefore did not reflect upon its significance) or 2) they did view the incident as problematic, but upon reflection interpreted the water health and safety issues to be no more important than routine-town business. Neither of these explanations, however, appeared particularly convincing. We concluded that Mead's approach was too limited to explain the interpretive differences observed in Milford and set ourselves to the task of studying the nature of interpretation itself.

What have we learned from our study of Gadamer's analysis of interpretation? We have learned, first of all, that there exists an alternative approach to the conceptualization of interpretation which diverges fundamentally from the strictly epistemological view of interpretation typical of interpretive sociology and traditional hermeneutics. Our discussion of Truth and Method has shown that Gadamer's analysis of interpretation is more comprehensive than that of any interpretive sociologist, including that of Weber, Mead, or Schutz. In Gadamer's work interpretation is described as the manifestation of understanding in a particular situation, and understanding is viewed ontologically as our preconsious and practical relationship to the world. This means that interpretation may be more accurately understood within

sociology as an experience consisting of preconscious as well as conscious elements. Gadamer's work provides a theoretical framework capable of guiding the sociological analysis of these preconscious dimensions. As such, his work may be used to develop a more comprehensive approach to the study of the relationship between interpretation and the social construction or fabrication of reality.

For example, we may want to use Gadamer's analysis of interpretation to help us study the preconscious factors underlying the interpretive differences that were observed in Milford. Gadamer's hermeneutics defines the preconscious dimensions of interpretation in terms of the experience and mediation of a linguistical tradition. As Gadamer points out, our participation in and mediation of the linguistical tradition has the form of a practical relationship. That is, it is both constitutive and representative of our way of relating to the world. The study of the preconscious dimensions of interpretation may therefore focus on 1) the linguistical concepts which are employed preconsciously in speech and/or 2) the concrete social relations of individuals, relationships which constitute their understanding. Following Gadamer, we would want to study the preconscious linguistical concepts (prejudices) which Milfordians associated with such notions as "water shortage," "contamination," and "toxic waste." It is possible, for example, that the Milfordians who came to give

priority to water, health, and safety issues following the contamination discovery had very different prejudices regarding the meaning of these and related terms, terms which were used to construct the definition of the meaning of the situation. We would also expect the two groups to have different understandings, that is, different practical relationships to the world and the Milford community in particular. To some extent this dimension can be accessed through an analysis of socio-demographic variables, for such variables describe the biography or personal history of an individual and thus represent to some extent one's ontological condition and understanding. Professor Hamilton focused on such variables in his first analysis, and found that youth, gender, and parenthood appeared to be characteristic of immediate environmental concern in Milford. Following Gadamer we would want to expand the analysis to include other aspects of one's understanding. For example, an important practical relationship in this context would be property ownership. According to Gadamer's hermeneutics, the understanding of property owners would be constituted differently than that of non-property owners, and as a result, this would in part explain interpretive differences between owners and non-owners. For example, owing to an implicit concern over protecting the value of their property, owners might be inclined to underplay the importance of the contamination incident since emphasizing

its importance might translate into bad publicity for Milford as a whole and ultimately feed back negatively on property values.

Gadamer's hermeneutics also suggests that the approach taken in our original analysis of the interpretive differences in Milford was mistaken in that it viewed interpretation exclusively as a cognitive process. Gadamer's work suggests that we view interpretation as an experience, of which cognition is only one part. In light of this our initial approach appears overly abstract, and in some sense, fictional. In light of Gadamer's analysis of interpretation we might simply say that, owing to differences in understanding stemming from different practical social relations, some Milfordians experienced the meaning of water health and safety issues to be more important than routine town business, while others did not. It was not that anyone consciously decided that such issues were more or less important, but rather that they experienced them as such, owing to their understanding. While this explanation might be too general for many social scientists, it nevertheless is a reasonable interpretation of the empirical facts. The value of the explanation is that it opens up several lines of questioning and inquiry. For example, we would want to further examine the actual differences in practical social relations, and in this way add flesh to the bones of our more general interpretation.

Having taken as our point of departure in this study the research problem posed by our observations in Milford, it was only natural that we would begin discussing the sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics by demonstrating the possibilities and correctives which it provides for explaining the interpretive differences observed in Milford. However it is not our intention to re-examine the Milford data in any substantive sense, for to apply what we have learned from Gadamer would require an entirely new analysis. It is our intention instead to look forward and to establish the implications of Gadamer's work for sociology in general. We will discuss the significance of Gadamer's work on two distinct analytical levels, the theoretical and the practical. While it is not our intention to introduce an artificial distinction between these mutually inclusive types of experience, it is nevertheless fair to say that some of the implications of Gadamer's work pertain more to theoretical issues, while others appear more relevant to practical issues, such as methodological issues and questions regarding new areas of analysis.

The theoretical implications of Gadamer's work are many, and our exploration of them in this chapter does not pretend to be definitive or exhaustive. Considering that his work has largely been overlooked by social theorists, the aim of our discussion is simply to open discussion on the

theoretical possibilities arising from his insights into the nature of interpretation. While we will exploit our discussion of the social-theoretical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics later in our discussion of its more practical implications, our discussion of its theoretical significance is for the most part speculative and exploratory. It should be read as suggestive of the directions which his work may be taken within social theory.

By contrast, our discussion of the practical implications of Gadamer's work aims to be substantive and programmatic. Substantive in that it aims to identify specific questions arising from Gadamer's hermeneutics that deserve to be studied sociologically; and programmatic in that it aims to outline how this might be done in an empirical sense. Our discussion focuses on outlining the requisites for the sociological study of prejudices and hermeneutical reflection. This will require us to 1) operationally define these two terms and 2) establish precisely why they deserve to be studied sociologically.

Before embarking on our discussion of the theoretical and practical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics it will prove worthwhile to summarize its main features.

1) Interpretations are the conscious expressions of preconscious experiences of understanding. This means that interpretation cannot proceed without a preconception of its object. Hence, interpretation is, by nature, prejudiced.

2) The preconscious elements of interpretation may be referred to as prejudices because they are

preconscious linguistical concepts the truth status of which is assumed during their moment of application.[1]

3) Defined thusly prejudices are not merely psychological for they constitute our relationship to the world and as such structure experience.[2]

4) By acknowledging the prejudiced nature of interpretation and questioning through critical discourse the meaning of prejudices we are able to become conscious of what would otherwise be a hidden effect of history upon us.

5) Prejudices may be true or false and it is the task of hermeneutical reflection to distinguish the latter from the former.

6) We must, however, acknowledge the fact that we can never become fully aware of the constitutive effect of history for this effect is constitutive of experience itself, and as such, cannot be isolated as an object of consciousness.[3]

---

[1] That is, prejudices are assumed to be true when they are applied in interpretation for they themselves do not appear as objects of consciousness but instead constitute the experience through which objects are interpreted.

[2] Prejudices may be distinguished from subconscious motivations in that they may be experienced through common dialogue and do not require systematized procedures of analysis (such as Freudian psychoanalysis).

[3] This is a somewhat difficult yet extremely important point which is, in essence, simply another way of expressing the notion of the hermeneutic circle. On page 38 of his work Gadamer's Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale, 1985), Joel Weinsheimer explains the point thusly.

> When we hear a bird's song, we hear the song and not the hearing; though we are aware of our hearing, it is not thematized or objectified: methodization is possible, but only subsequent to a nonthematic awareness, and then only by means of new intentional acts which are not themselves thematized.

In other words, we can never become fully aware of the nonthematic or prejudiced aspects of interpretation for our questioning of these aspects is itself constituted by nonthematic prejudices. It is this insight which the

Perhaps the most important implication of these points, all of which stem from the basic notion that understanding is ontological, is that our conscious interpretations are always at risk of being unknowingly falsely constituted. In other words, owing to the prejudiced nature of interpretation, which is an inevitable condition of the historical and linguistical situatedness of our existence, our conscious interpretations may be unknowingly constituted through false prejudices. I am aware of only one attempt to establish the significance of this Gadamerian insight for sociology. Jürgen Habermas has explored the sociological significance of the prejudiced nature of interpretation in terms of various methodological issues and questions, ultimately applying Gadamer's insight to a critique of positivism. Habermas, however, has not pursued the importance of the prejudiced nature of interpretation on any other level. It is the judgment of the present work that the significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for sociology turns on the implications of this one insight not as it pertains to a critique of method but as it pertains to a critique of the social construction of reality. If we accept the essential and constitutive role of interpretation for social action and the construction of social reality, it follows from Gadamer's analysis that the construction of

---

concept of the hermeneutical circle aims to convey, as it is used by Heidegger and Gadamer.

social reality must, to some extent, be falsely constituted. In light of Gadamer's hermeneutics the social construction of reality may be re-cast as the social fabrication of reality, where the term fabrication is used to denote the complex weaving of meaning-constitutive prejudices an unknown number of which are false. To the extent that the actual existence of false prejudices may be considered minimal or negligible, their effect on social reality may in fact be negligible. On the other hand, it may be the case that a significant portion of our prejudices are in fact false. In this case, the prejudiced nature of interpretation may be responsible for many of the problematic aspects of contemporary social reality.[4] Gadamer's identification of hermeneutical reflection, the experience through which we find ourselves in a position to experience consciously the prejudices that would otherwise operate behind our back, thus takes on a significance proportional to the extent to which prejudices are in fact false. The sociological significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics thus turns on its social significance, the meaning which it has for revealing the prevalence of false prejudices and the distribution of hermeneutical reflection. In this chapter we will discuss these two important

---

[4] An interesting question related to our discussion is, to what extent might the percentage of false societal-prejudices be subject to variation across different historical periods and cultures?

dimensions of social action- the prejudiced nature of interpretation, and hermeneutical reflection- and outline an approach for their sociological study.

We must be careful at this point to emphasize the fact that we can never become fully aware of the effect of history, which operates behind our back in the form of prejudices; prejudices are constitutive of conscious interpretation and are therefore a necessary condition of consciousness. This precludes the possibility of attempting to enlist sociology in some grand methodological attempt to purge society of its false prejudices. Such a task would be impossible in another sense, for it would require an assumption that we the sociologists are in a privileged position when it comes to judging the truth status of everyday interpretations, and this runs counter to Gadamer's theory of truth. From a Gadamerian perspective, truth is experienced, and this means that one cannot definitively judge the truth of another's interpretation. One can only help others to become conscious of the prejudices constitutive of their interpretation in such a way that they will be able to experience its truth or falsity for themselves.

Theoretical Implications

We may begin exploring the specifically theoretical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics by discussing it in terms of the longstanding sociological question regarding the relationship between individual and social structure. The term "social structure" is used widely within sociology despite the fact that there exits little agreement regarding its meaning. Rather than viewing this as cause for alarm, some sociologists have interpreted it as an indication of sociology's vitality. Merton, for example, emphasizes that "complementary views are essential for a thorough understanding of social structure and that competing theories make vital contributions to the advancement of knowledge in a field."[5] Leaving aside the question of whether the disagreement over the definition of social structure is good or bad for sociology, we might ask what is it that divides social-structure theorists in the first place? The debate over the nature of social structure involves two more or less clearly defined camps, one which views social structure as external to and distinct from individual social action (macro-oriented approaches) and the other which views social structure as the fluid and transient effect of social interactions and transactions

---

[5] As described by Peter M. Blau, ed.,in Approaches to the Study of Social Structure (London: Free Press, 1975), p. 1.

initiated by individuals (micro-oriented approaches).[6] The danger with a macro-oriented approach lies in underplaying the creative and mediating effects of individuals on the construction or fabrication of social reality. Conversely, micro-oriented theorists tend to exaggerate the creative and mediating effects of the individual. In response to the macro view, we might point out that while it is true that we often find ourselves in situations not of our making, and in a sense are "determined" by these situations or structures, it is also clear that we contribute, in varying degrees, to the particular course of action which we will engage in in any situation. In response to the micro view, we might say that while we contribute to the unfolding of situations through deliberate behavior, the deliberation of our behavior is itself influenced by factors not of our own making. To say then that social reality is in a constant state of flux, owing to the reflective definitions of situations arrived at by individuals, is an exaggeration.

We may gain insight into this problematic by examining the work of Durkheim, who in his effort to establish sociology as a distinct and legitimate science, posited a view of social structure which has greatly influenced the

---

[6] See Blau's introduction to Approaches to the Study of Social Stucture, 1975, for a descriptive overview of the leading theoretical positions regarding social structure. While it is true that there exists several attempts at what might be called "middle-range" approaches to social structure, the majority of social-structural theories are either micro- or macro-oriented.

discussion of the individual-social structure relationship. In The Rules of Sociological Method Durkheim identifies a universal feature of the human condition that had yet to be defined and studied as a scientific phenomenon.

> In reality there is in every society a certain group of phenomena which may be differentiated from those studied by the natural sciences. When I fulfil my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom.[7]

One must pay extremely close attention to the words in this passage, for much turns on the extent to which Durkheim can claim that these phenomena, which he will eventually define as "social facts," are actually "external" to individuals. In the passage above Durkheim states that the behavioral expectations experienced by the individual are "defined externally to myself and my acts." This wording leaves open the possibility that we may participate in and contribute to the definitions of situations, although in the last analysis, for all intents and purposes, the definitions are beyond us. However, it soon becomes clear that Durkheim is not willing to grant so much to the individual for he shortly thereafter comes to define social facts as "existing outside the individual consciousness."[8] According to Durkheim, it is not merely that norms are decided

---

[7] Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method. Translated by Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), p. 1.

[8] Ibid., p. 2.

externally, but that they exist external to the consciousness of the individual. This inference is based on the observation that social facts, such as the beliefs and practices of one's religion, are "ready-made at birth." According to Durkheim "their existence prior to his own implies their existence outside of himself."[9]

Durkheim of course defends the existence of such social phenomena by pointing out the intimate connection between external definitions of situations and the sanctions which their violation invite. Social facts are thus both external and coercive, and Durkheim appeals to the factual nature of the latter to prove the existence of the former.

> The public conscience exercises a check on every act which offends it by means of the surveillance it exercises over the conduct of its citizens, and the appropriate penalties at its disposal. In many cases the constraint is less violent, but nevertheless it always exists. If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attentuated form, the same effects as a punishment in the strict sense of the word.[10]

The importance of Durkheim for both sociology and anthropology stems from his successful distinction of these disciplines from psychology. Psychological phenomena, in Durkheim's view, exist in the "individual consciousness," whereas sociological and anthropological phenomena exist in

---

[9] Ibid., p. 2.

[10] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

the "collective" consciousness, as evidenced in common practices and the expectations imposed on us. However, in viewing social phenomena as social facts in a methodologically positivistic sense (as "things" or natural objects), Durkheim opens the door to a view of social structure which neglects the individual element of social phenomena. The contradiction in his view of social facts as external to the individual stems from the fact that they (social facts, which we may construe as behavioral expectations) are shared by individuals. That is, they are constituted in social relations. They are the meaningful bonds without which social groups would not exist.

While Durkheim provides the methodological and theoretical tenets for a macro-view of social structure, Max Weber may be credited with providing the micro-view with its primary assumptions.[11] Like Durkheim, Weber was concerned with distinguishing sociology from other fields, particularly psychology, and consequently viewed it necessary to state the methodological nature of sociology and define its subject matter. However, whereas Durkheim views sociology's unit of analysis as "social facts," Weber takes its subject matter to be "social action."

Action is "social" insofar as its subjective meaning

---

[11] This is not to say that interactionism is directly indebted to Weber, but only that his ideas have served as a major impetus to the growth of interpretive sociology and may be taken as representive, if not entirely constitutive of, the micro-view of social structure.

> takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.[12]

On a general level, this view of social action is no different from Durkheim's. In both cases social action is viewed as a form of conformity, as action performed according to the expectations of others. In both cases the sociologist is led to focus on what Giddens describes as "common adopted practices."[13] There are, of course, important differences separating Durkheim and Weber once we look beyond this general overlapping of their positions. These differences surface when we contrast Durkheim's rules of sociology with Weber's methodological concepts presented in his early essay "Some categories of interpretive sociology."

> Action specifically significant for interpretive sociology is, in particular, behavior that: (1) in terms of the subjectively intended meaning of the actor, is related to the behavior of others, (2) is codetermined in its course through this relatedness, and thus (3) can be intellibly explained in terms of this (subjectively) intended meaning.[14]

The most striking difference between Durkheim and Weber, brought into relief by this passage, concerns the issue of

---

[12] Max Weber, "Basic sociological terms," in Economy and Society, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), Volume 1, p. 4.

[13] Anthony Giddens, "Sociology: Issues and problems," in A. R. Sadovnik, C. H. Persell, E. A. Baumann and R. G. Mitchell Jr., eds., Exploring Society (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) p. 11.

[14] Max Weber, "Some categories of interpretive sociology," 1981, p. 152.

external constraint versus individual free will. Whereas Durkheim views behavioral expectations as a form of external constraint, Weber views these expectations as shared expectations, expectations that are "codetermined." Weber thus attributes to individuals the ability to negotiate and mediate the definitions of situations, and thus diverges fundamentally from Durkheim. Whereas Durkheim views the questioning of norms as pathological, Weber views such questioning as a responsibility.[15] It follows from this important difference that Weber cannot accept the abstraction of expectations of behavior, or the common practices which are their result, into things or objects (social facts), but must insist on viewing them as part of individual social action.

Just as Durkheim has been criticized for overemphasizing the importance of the social group and social structure, Weber has been accused of reducing sociology's unit of analysis to individuals.[16] It should be emphasized, however, that it is incorrect and in some sense contradictory to describe Weberian sociology as individualistic, for he defines social action as a

---

[15] Unlike Blumer, who tends to exaggerate the interpretive leverage of the individual with regard to the codetermination or negotiation of situational definitions, Weber does not speculate on the extent to which this codetermination is swayed by individual influences or influences beyond the reproach of the individual.

[16] See, for example, Frank Parkin, Max Weber, (London: Tavistock, 1982), p. 19-27.

relationship, as a process between two or more individuals, and it is in this sense never merely individual. Hence, the unit of analysis in Weber's formulation is not the individual, but social action, which is invariably a social relationship.

We embarked on our discussion of Durkheim and Weber in order to get at the nuts and bolts of the basic concepts underlying the macro and micro views of social structure. In light of our discussion some interesting parallels may be drawn between Gadamer's hermeneutics and the classical sociological approaches which we have mentioned. This is particularly true with regard to Durkheim. An interesting comparison can be drawn between Durkheim and Gadamer with respect to their respective views regarding the structural importance of <u>preconscious</u> meanings. Consider the following question. Given Durkheim's claim that we are all externally constrained by the normative expectations of social groups, why is it that such behavioral constraint is so readily tolerated? Durkheim would have two answers to this question. The first is obvious: we tolerate social constraint in order to avoid any repressive sanctions which non-conformity might invite. His second answer, I believe, is less obvious, and extremely interesting: we tolerate external social constraint because it operates, for the most part, <u>preconsciously</u>.

> If this power of external coercion asserts itself so clearly in cases of resistance, it must exist also in

> the first mentioned cases (cases of non-resistance), although we are unconscious of it. We are then victims of the illusion of having ourselves created that which actually forced itself from without. If the complacency with which we permit ourselves to be carried along conceals the pressure undergone, nevertheless it does not abolish it. Thus, air is no less heavy because we do not detect its weight.[17]

The importance of this observation is that it equates social structure with preconscious[18] phenomena similar to those which Gadamer takes to be constitutive of interpretive experience. The similarities between the view of our interpretive condition as expressed by Durkheim in this passage and that found in Gadamer's hermeneutics are striking. Durkheim asserts that the social structuring of consciousness is generally undetected because it is largely preconscious, and as such, leaves us open to the illusion that our conscious interpretations are our own creations. This point is shared by Gadamer, who argues forcefully in Truth and Method that we are not masters of our own reason, as the Enlightenment would have us believe. Rather than delude ourselves into thinking that we determine our own conscious interpretations, we must instead admit our historicity lest we submit to the tyranny of hidden prejudices. In addition, while Durkheim views consciousness

---

[17] Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, 1950, p. 5.

[18] To avoid confusion, we will discuss what Durkheim refers to as "unconscious" as "preconsious." This is consistent with our earlier distinction between preconscious and unconscious, the former being a sociological category, the latter a psychological one.

as a function of the internalization of normative constraint, Gadamer discusses conscious interpretation as an epiphenomon of preconscious understanding. Durkheim, by way of a brilliantly conceived analogy, stresses that the relative hiddenness of this preconscious structuring in no way diminishes its effect, merely its propensity for being grasped consciously. Similarly, prejudices are no less important for interpretation because they operate preconsciously. On the contrary, their concealed nature makes them all the more important for it demands that we attempt to become conscious of their constitutive effect.

Our discussion of these similarities is not intended to suggest any great affinity between these two thinkers, for despite these general overlappings of insight Durkheim and Gadamer differ fundamentally on a number of important points. Perhaps the most important difference between the two stems from Durkheim's belief that the preconscious structuring of consciousness is <u>external</u> to or <u>outside</u> of the individual, a view fundamentally at odds with Gadamer's ontological view of understanding. Durkheim describes this structuring (his choice of words is unfortunate) as something "forced" from without. Gadamer describes this effect as the constitutive effect of one's historical situation and practical relationship to the world (one's understanding). According to Gadamer, the preconscious structuring of conscious experience is part of the

individual's experience within a linguistic tradition, and is therefore constitutive from within the individual: the preconscious constitution of experience is part of the experience of the individual and cannot be viewed as an external force.[19] The point of our comparison is that in Durkheim, as well as in Gadamer, we find an argument against an overly optimistic and naive view of individual consciousness, such as that typical of symbolic interactionism.[20] Symbolic interactionists tend to believe that individuals have the freedom of conscious choice in particular situations. If we are to believe this, however, we must qualify the meaning of "conscious" choice. In light of Gadamer's hermeneutics, we must not exaggerate the autonomy of consciousness, for consciousness is constituted preconsciously. This means that what might appear at the surface (at first glance) to be an autonomous, conscious decision, is actually the manifestation of a preconscious understanding the nature of which is historical and linguistic. At the same time, however, we must be careful not to overemphasize the determinative effect of our historical-linguistic tradition, for we must acknowledge the

---

[19] Another important difference, of course, is the methdodological commitment of Durkheim to positivism, and the related notion that social facts are "things." Gadamer would reject such a view of human experience out of hand.

[20] For example, Herbert Blumer has exaggerated the autonomous nature of individual consciousness in Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

mediating effect of the individual, and the importance of critical reflection for the modification of tradition and for social change. That is, we must acknowledge the significance of hermeneutical reflection. These requirements preclude the simple application of either a structural-functional or symbolic interactionist view of social reality. In light of Gadamer's hermeneutics, Durkheim is incorrect to view social phenomena as external to the individual. Durkheim is also incorrect in viewing social structure as determinative of individual behavior, for while such social phenomena structure social action, they do not determine it in the strict sense of the word. Rather than "determinative," we may follow Gadamer and view social phenomena as constitutive of social action. In Gadamer's view, social structure constitutes our understanding and hence our interpretive experience. Gadamer goes beyond Durkheim in another important respect. Whereas Durkheim appears content with accepting the preconscious structuring of consciousness (a feature of structural-functionalism in general suggesting a conservative view of reality), Gadamer calls for the critical acknowledgment of the prejudiced nature of interpretation lest false prejudices continue to operate behind our back; a situation tantamount to being dominated by the influence of history. Gadamer therefore offers us a way out of the macro-micro problematic by enabling us to

acknowledge 1) the constitutive nature of history and tradition (something micro-theorists have difficulty doing) while simultaneously acknowledging 2) the mediating and critical ability of the individual, and emphasizing the importance of criticizing and questioning that which constitutes (structures) our experience (something macro-theorists have difficulty doing).

While Gadamer does not raise the question of social structure in explicit terms, we may infer from Truth and Method that he would take social structure to denote the the preconscious meanings which constitute our relation to the world and structure experience. Indeed, it can be suggested that the location of social structure within the existence of the individual in the form of preconsious meanings based on one's relation to the world suggests that any strict distinction between individual and structure is erroneous. This is because what is traditionally referred to as social structure, language, meaning, social and economic relations, norms and formal behavioral precepts, are part of the structure of experience itself, and are not "external" forces which act over and above the individual. A similar case for rejecting sociology's distinction between individual and social structure can be drawn from Heidegger. Interestingly, Durkheim's observation that social facts exist prior to our experience of them is similar to Heidegger's point that when we are born we are "thrown," in

a sense, into a historical situation not of our making. However, as we have already seen, Durkheim views this as an indication that history and social facts are external to and distinct from us. From Heidegger's view, when we are thrown into a historical situation, that situation becomes part of us as much as we become part of it: our experience of history cannot be separated from history's experience of us. Human existence and history are mutually constitutive. However, Durkheim fails to give adequate consideration to the fact that we embody history and exist co-extensively with it, viewing humans instead as objects of history - subjected to its external effect.

Heidegger's position regarding these issues may be inferred from the manner by which he addresses the question of the meaning of being. As we discussed earlier, the difficulty experienced by Heidegger when he raises the question of the meaning of being leads him to the realization that the meaning which the question has for him is somehow already given to him preconsciously before he experiences it consciously. Heidegger concludes that the experience of his own understanding of the question is illustrative of the structure of understanding in general. That is, the structure of understanding consists of preconscious meanings which are the result of one's existence within a particular historical situation. This aspect of Heidegger's work may be related to the

individual/social structure problematic. It is important to note that Heidegger locates the meaning carried by the Western philosophical tradition within himself. This meaning is not merely within his mind, but part of the structure of his being; part of the way he relates to the world in general. In sociological terms, this means that Heidegger locates the determinative effects of social structure as something which is part of himself, part of his very being, as distinguished from 1) external social facts which constrain him from without, 2) or a conscious or deliberative process which takes place within his mind. This, however, does not amount to a strict structuralist account of human agency, a view that would deny any mediating effect of the agent on social structure.

The work of Heidegger and Gadamer suggests that we should reject the traditional dichotomy between individual and social structure. However, this does not mean that sociologists should abandon the term "social structure." We may modify our use of the term to denote the constitutive effect of history and tradition, and thus retain its general explanatory importance while avoiding the false connotations it might otherwise suggest (for example, the notion that social structure is an external force which imposes itself on the individual).

In light of our discussion we may suggest a theoretical connection that may be used to identify and study aspects of

social structure that have generally been overlooked by sociologists. This connection is the one made by Gadamer (and also Durkheim) between the preconscious and what we may describe as social structure (language, culture, social and economic relations- in a word the tradition we live in). This connection suggests that we may study the prejudiced nature of interpretation and social action and thereby gain insight into the nature of social reality and the organization of society. In a limited sense, this is what Marxists do when they study aspects of economic relations of which we are unaware. However, contrary to a strictly Marxist view of reality, the analysis proposed here would not be exclusively economic. Following Gadamer, we may begin to examine social structure by way of the study of prejudices. By studying prejudices we will be able to understand the tacit dimensions of social structure which typically go unnoticed; the preconscious determinants of interpretive experience. It is important to consider that the study of the prejudiced nature of interpretation is at the same time the study of that which is tyrannical about social structure. This raises the possibility of examining the nature of power and domination by way of the sociological study of prejudices. Let us pursue this line of thinking.

Toward a Theory of Interpretive Domination

Our discussion of the theoretical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the question of the relationship between individual and social structure will be drawn on later in this chapter when we discuss how we might begin to study the constitutive role of prejudices and hermeneutical reflection for the social fabrication of reality. The discussion which we begin now suggests that Gadamer's hermeneutics may be used to conceptualize a theory of interpretive domination. Our discussion does not pretend to be definitive or exhaustive. It aims simply to open discussion on what may prove to be an important area of theoretical and empirical analysis within sociology.

In addition to the implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics for the conceptualization of social structure his work may be viewed as an important theoretical step toward establishing a critical approach to the analysis of the relationship between power and interpretive experience. Recently a number of thinkers have turned their attention to the study of power at the micro or interpersonal level. In sociology, for example, Giddens has argued for the study of "relations of power in interaction."[21] In philosophy, Michel Foucault has come to view power as all-pervasive, as part of any discourse whether it be a historical discourse

---

[21] Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 110.

or a discourse between two subjects. He writes,

> there are two meanings of the words subject, subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.[22]

From a Gadamerian perspective, we may begin to consider what we may term the interpretive power of individuals and groups. How might we conceptualize "interpretive power?" Is there an element of power in all interpretive experience? Interpretive experience is empowering in that it enables us consciously to grasp and express our practical relation to the world. In one sense, interpretive experience provides us with the power to change our environment and improve our material existence; in another sense it enables us to partake in the richness of a meaningful world which would otherwise be unintelligible. Given that we have already dealt extensively with the nature of interpretation, let us proceed by discussing the nature of power.

According to Giddens, power refers to the "transformative capacity" of human action, a notion which he likens to Marx's notion of praxis. Giddens' notion of power thus refers to man's ability to transform nature and to the "restlessly self-modifying character of human society."

---

[22] Michel Foucault, as described by Paul Rabinow in his introduction to The Foucault Reader (New York: Pantheon, 1984) p. 21. Original quote appears in Foucault's essay "The subject and power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 212.

> 'Power' in the sense of the transformative capacity of human agency is the capability of the actor to intervene in a series of events so as to alter their course .... 'power' in the narrower, relational sense is a property of interaction, and may be defined as the capability to secure outcomes where the realization of these outcomes depends upon the agency of <u>others</u>.[23]

Following Giddens, we may define interpretive power as the capacity to transform our experience of the world into meaningful interpretations and expressions. In practical terms, interpretive power thus refers to our ability to mediate the definitions of situations.[24] Given the social nature of meaning, and the fact that our experience is constituted socially, we may say that the interpretive power of one stands always in relation to that of another. Thus, just as the capability to secure behavioral outcomes turns on the behavior of others, the capability of interpretive experience to define and mediate situational meanings is invariably related to the interpretive experience of others. This means that our interpretive power is intimately related to that of another and to some extent dependent upon in.

According to Giddens, "the concept of power ... does not logically imply the existence of conflict."[25] Giddens thus departs from Weber's view of power as the capacity of an

---

[23] Giddens, <u>New Rules of Sociological Method</u>, 1976, p. 111.

[24] It is important to note that we are using here W. I. Thomas' notion of the 'definition of the situation' in order to establish the social-theoretical implications of Gadamer's analysis of interpretation.

[25] Ibid., p. 112.

individual to realize his will, even against the opposition of others.

> It is the concept of 'interest,' rather than that of power as such, which relates directly to conflict and solidarity. If power and conflict frequently go together, it is not because power is linked to the pursuance of interests, and men's interests may fail to coincide. All I mean to say by this is that, while power is a feature of every form of interaction, division of interest is not.[26]

This view of power is very similar to that proposed by Hannah Arendt,[27] who like Giddens, rejects Weber's definition.[28] According to Arendt, if one follows Weber, power becomes synonomous with the manipulative influence of one over another. Hence, Arendt argues that what Weber terms power is actually violence. But this does not mean that it is Arendt's intention to reduce power to violence. On the contrary, it is her aim to show that power need not be coercive, that there is power in cooperation, power in consensus. According to Arendt, "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert."[29]

In light of our discussion we may define interpretive power as the capability of mediating the meaning of a situational definition. When the realization of this

---

[26] Ibid., p. 112.

[27] Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, 1970).

[28] For an analysis of Arendt's conception of power see Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's communications concept of power," Social Research, Vol. 44 No. 1, 1977, pp. 3-24.

[29] Arendt, On Violence, 1970, p. 41.

capability is precluded for one reason or another, we can say that the realization of one's interpretive power has been violated. Perhaps the most obvious example of the violation of interpretive power would be the exclusion of certain parties from discourses concerning decisions which directly affect them. It would, of course, be utopian to think that we could all share equally in every discourse directly concerning us, particularly at the political level. In political discourses our interpretations and interests are supposedly included through the efforts of our elected representatives. In this sense, our political system at least acknowledges the right to exercise our interpretive power by providing a mechanism which in the very least provides a symbolic inclusion of our interpretive interests. Our political system thus avoids what would otherwise be a blatent denial of the public's interpretive power. However, in other institutions, such as the educational and corporate spheres, our interpretive power is often not even granted symbolic respect. There exists in these settings countless examples of interpretive domination, situations within which the expression of our interpretive power in the form of a question or assertion is denied out of hand. In some instances interpretive domination is blatent, such as in the case of a corporate executive commanding an underling to see things a certain way such that he or she will be able to perform an action according to the desire of his or her

superior. In such cases the violators are unapologetic, the victims submissive and accomodating. It is unsettling to think that, if we follow Max Weber's reflections on complex organizations, bureaucracy is predicated on interpretive domination, for it requires of the bureaucrat in every instance adherence to prescribed interpretive formula, the deviation from which leads to reprimand and punishment. Considering the pervasiveness of complex organizations, all of which in varying degrees presuppose a certain amount of interpretive domination, one can only conclude that the free exercise of one's interpretive power is a rare occurrence in contemporary advanced societies, a privilege the distribution of which would seem to be highly stratified, owing to the fact that with political and economic power comes the authority to dictate situational definitions. It would be very interesting, however, to explore the extent to which certain occupations, occupations lacking political and economic power, nevertheless enjoy the free exercise of interpretive power, while those laying claim to political and economic power nevertheless are interpretively constrained. Adding to the interesting nature of this question is the fact that interpretive domination may be self-inflicted, and may therefore exist in instances in which individuals are otherwise free to exercise their interpretive power.

In addition to studying interpretive domination in

hierarchical organizations we would want to study it in its less formal forms. For example, oftentimes acts of interpretive domination are actually rather subtle, such as in the college classroom where student's questions are precluded not because they are openly discouraged, but because of the format of the lecture itself, or because the students are trained for memorization and recitation in primary and secondary schools, and therefore lack the skills to exercise their interpretive ability, which has atrophied having been neglected for so long.[30]

Other subtle examples of interpretive domination include: the casual imposition of a situational definition, which might take the form of a friendly comment such as, "you don't want to see that movie, I heard it's boring."[31]

---

[30] Indeed, it may very well be the case that the very phenomenon to which the concept of interpretive domination refers may be so subtle, or taken-for-granted, that some might view it as insignificant and unimportant. Others may take the position that interpretive power should be stratified, owing perhaps to the belief that the opinions of some are more valuable than those of others. Indeed, Gadamer acknowledges that yielding to the authority of an expert is not a violation of one's rights, it is simply the acknowledgement that the expert, an MD for example, is superior in judgment with regard to medical matters. Such an example, however, is categorically distinct from the countless situations people find themselves in during which time their interpretive power is denied out of hand.

[31] We may note other examples of interpretive domination which are even more subtle but nevertheless meet our definitional criteria. For example, hearing the words of another without actually listening, which may be accompanied by such comments as "sure, sure, I see what you're saying ... but"; passing a negative judgment of the meaning of a person's expression without attempting to clarify whether or not your interpretation is consistent

While such an imposition may appear trivial, it is in reality quite significant, not only because it is terribly important that individuals should be able to mediate the definition of a situation they will then be behaving in and experiencing, but because this example suggests the imposing nature of seemingly harmless and casual statements. When we become aware of this, our very self expression, in all situations and at all times, becomes stripped of whatever innocence it might otherwise claim and emerges as an expression of power the intent of which is to shape reality and others according to the way we are. A theory of interpretive domination would open discourse on a host of questions regarding the essence of power itself, which it reveals as nothing other than our expression of self in the world; an expression which manifests most primarily in interpretive experience and only secondarily in terms of economic and political decisions and actions.

In general terms we have defined interpretive domination as the preclusion or violation of people's ability to exercise their interpretive power, where interpretive power is taken to mean their ability to express themselves symbolically and therefore contribute to the mediation of the definition of a situation. Why, however, should we even consider pursuing such a theory? What is the significance

---

with that which was intended; failing to ask a question when one feels the need to and has the opportunity to do so (an example of self-inflicted interpretive domination).

of the phenomenon of interpretive domination and why should sociologists be concerned with its specification and study? The answers to these questions stem from the implications of Gadamer's view that our experience is structured through interpretation. As we have already seen, Gadamer in fact views the nature of experience to be hermeneutical in that it involves (preconscious) understanding, (conscious) interpretation and the (practical) application of interpretation. The violation of one's interpretive power thus constitutes a violation of the structure of one's experience of the world. It is therefore an ontological violation, a violation of the quality of one's life. Interpretive domination is thus dehumanizing. This is the significance of interpretive domination and this is why it deserves to be studied sociologically.

Semantical Analysis and Prejudices

In our discussion of the theoretical implications of Gadamer's work we established that his notion of the preconscious constitution of interpretation enables us to speak of the social-structuring of individual experience in terms of preconscious linguistical concepts or prejudices. This clears the way for the analysis of social structure by way of an analysis of prejudices. The aim of such research would be to study the relationship between prejudices and conscious interpretation and social action.

As we discussed earlier, perhaps the most important implication of Gadamer's notion of the preconscious or prejudiced structuring of experience is that our conscious interpretations are always at risk of being unknowingly falsely predicated. This in turn suggests that the social construction of reality should be reconceptualized in order to account for the fact that conscious decisions are often constituted through false prejudices, but otherwise appear sound by virtue of the fact that these prejudices escape conscious experience because they do not appear as objects of consciousness during their moment of application. Hence, we may begin to speak in terms of the social fabrication of reality. We may therefore conclude that one practical implication of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that it calls out for the sociological study of prejudices and their relationship to the social fabrication of reality. How

might sociologists study prejudices, the preconscious linguistical concepts which constitute interpretive experience?

We discussed earlier how Gadamer analyzes the Enlightenment's definition of the meaning of "authority" by focusing on the assumptions of meaning which the Enlightenment associated with the term. In effect, Gadamer calls into question the Enlightenment's interpretation of the meaning of authority by identifying the prejudices constitutive of its interpretation. This provides us with an example of how we might begin to indentify and study prejudices in a sociological and non-psychological sense. Following Gadamer, prejudices may be viewed as the implicit or preconscious linguistical concepts associated with particular words. By bringing into critical discourse aspects of linguistical concepts which are typically assumed, Gadamer in effect brings into discourse prejudices themselves. When the prejudices are experienced as false, the larger interpretation of which these prejudices were previously constitutive of is likely to be experienced differently. Simply stated, the explicit or conscious experience of prejudices may result in the negation of false prejudices.

In so far as this example approximates linguistical analysis Gadamer's hermeneutical reflection on linguistical concepts is clearly closer to semantical analysis than it is

to syntactical analysis. Interestingly, a paper written by Professor John Carroll argues for the importance of becoming conscious of our preconscious use of language in much the same way that Gadamer in Truth and Method calls for the development of an effective-historical consciousness.[32] What is interesting about Carroll's work is that he reaches his conclusions without once making reference to hermeneutics or philosophy. Concerned about the ethnocentrism and ecological shortsightedness of American policy makers and citizens, he deconstructs the meaning of several words which are typically assumed to be true, but upon further analysis, are clearly erroneous.

The parallels between Professor Carroll's approach and that of Gadamer are striking given that the former had never read or heard of the latter and has only a vague notion of the meaning of hermeneutics.[33] Carroll's point of departure is the realization after

> almost two decades of teaching, research writing, and publishing, of analyzing ecological and environmental issues and their causes ... that any solution to an environmental problem put forth in the conventional way, as a piece-meal, patch-it-up approach, would not

---

[32] John E. Carroll, "Ecology and moral choice: Bias, prejudice and ecology." Unpublished paper, Department of Forest Resources, University of New Hampshire, 1988.

[33] Professor Carroll provided me with a working copy of his paper "Ecology and moral choice: Bias, prejudice and ecology" in the spring of 1988 and we discussed it at length on at least two occasions. I would like to thank Professor Carroll for permitting me to cite the paper in this study. Professor Carroll presented a modified version of the paper while visiting Rhodes College on October 20, 1988.

> only not solve the problem but would bring with it a whole host of other problems .... It was thus that I came to realize that there was a much more fundamental problem in our assumptions, in our basic thinking, which was preventing us from effectively or even adequately dealing with our environmental problems, and our social problems in the broadest sense.[34]

What is striking about the similarity between Carroll and Gadamer is that both conclude that the nature of interpretive experience is prejudiced.

> We are all biased, prejudiced, conditioned by our lives, our experiences, our inheritance, our proneness toward a certain world view .... that is part of the human condition, part of what it means to be human.[35]

What does Carroll consider the implication of the prejudiced nature of interpretation to be? He writes that, when we fail to realize our natural bias, we "begin to ascribe reality to that which is not real." When we distort reality in such a way, we create "gargantuan" problems, for our understanding of reality is false and cannot help but result in erroneous interpretations of what constitutes a problem and its solution.

> The remedy is to know and respect our biases, our prejudices, our limitations to objectivity; to reject our intellectual arrogance which has gotten us into these predicaments; and to have the humility to much more fundamentally question our assumptions and, indeed, the very values we profess to believe in.[36]

Carroll's views are not formulated in reference to

---

[34] Ibid., p. 1.

[35] Ibid., p. 1.

[36] Ibid., p. 2.

philosophy, hermeneutics or sociology. They derive instead from his practical experience and are aimed at environmental policy reform. It is nevertheless not surprising that his ideas should so closely approximate those of Gadamer, for practical experience is both Gadamer's point of departure and ultimate concern. If we compare Carroll's position on interpretation to that arrived at by Gadamer there are no fundamental differences. Following Carroll, understanding is viewed ontologically, as a result of lived experience; preconceptions are viewed as prejudices; the failure to acknowledge this results in the confusion of reality; this in turn impresses upon us the need to develop a new attitude, which is in Carroll's words, one of intellectual humility as opposed to arrogance. More striking than these similarities, however, is the fact that Carroll comes to view prejudices in <u>linguistical</u> terms, and comes to focus his attention on the importance of semantical analysis for revealing the "deep" meaning "underlying our usage of certain words."

> It is appropriate to start with a subject we are very often prone to dismiss, "semantics." Indeed, the way we use that very word, at least in the American version of the English language, is dismissive: "That's just semantics" .... we thus ignore, nay, dismiss, the deep and very real philosophical meaning underlying our usage of certain words.[37]

It is interesting to note that before Carroll can suggest the value of semantics he must first address the prejudice

---

[37] Ibid., p. 2.

against semantics, just as Gadamer in his attempt to rehabilitate the notion of prejudice must first deconstruct the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice itself.[38] Following Carroll's discussion of semantics he focuses on a number of terms, one of which is "primitive." He points out that, generally speaking, the meaning which the term typically signifies in our society is pejorative. He points out, however, that this is a biased and falsely prejudiced interpretation of its meaning. According to Carroll the term "primitive"

> has become ... an excuse and an opportunity for people in our society to look down upon, to dismiss as without value those peoples who live in a traditional, close to the earth, close to nature manner, generally observing traditions that are many centuries old. "Primitive" peoples have much to teach us, but our arrogant and negative view toward them effectively closes off many possibilities to appreciate

---

[38] Interestingly, Carroll is not alone in his meta-critical concern over prejudices and the implications of the constitutive role which they play in our view of the environment and reality in general. E. F. Schumacher, in his classic work Small Is Beautiful (New York: Harper Row, 1973) pp. 82-83, asserts that although we must assume certain thoughts in order to think others, constitutive thoughts rarely become the focus of reflection itself. He writes, "when we think, we do not just think: we think with ideas .... but in modern times all too little attention has been paid to the study of the ideas which form the very instruments by which thought and observation proceed .... Indeed, it is often difficult to become aware of them, as they are the instruments and not the results of our thinking- just as you can see what is outside you, but cannot easily that with which you see, the eye itself." Schumacher is therefore equally concerned over the hidden role of prejudices. However, as this quotation indicates, his concern is epistemological, focusing on ideas and knowledge rather than linguistical meanings and practical relations.

or learn from them.[39]

Carroll contrasts our typically falsely prejudiced understanding of "primitive" with our equally biased use of the term "civilized." It is worthwhile to examine Carroll's thoughts on our usage of this term for it dramatizes the hidden and tacit nature of linguistical contradictions. Compared with "primitive"

> our usage of the word "civilized" has the opposite problem, a positive but no less value-laden and often inaccurate usage of the word. We use "civilized" to refer to ourselves, our Judaeo-Christian western industrial society, and to those who think as we do .... Can a society which brings the planet and humanity to the edge of nuclear holocaust, or ecological catastrophe, or one which permits milllions to starve, or conduct wars of aggression be considered "civilized as we use the term?[40]

Carroll makes it clear that it is not his intention to romanticize the "noble savage." His intention is simply to make the point that "the arrogant and prejudiced way we use these words, the negative use of primitive and the positive use of civilized, are ways we have of falsifying reality and feeding our prejudice, at great cost to all and to the planet as well."[41] In terms of Gadamer's hermeneutics Carroll is trying to help us to become conscious of the history which operates behind our backs as a result of our participation in a linguistic tradition. Like Gadamer,

---

[39] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[40] Ibid., p. 3.

[41] Ibid., p. 3.

Carroll believes that we can learn much from the definitions societies live by. Both believe that it is imperative that we become conscious of our preconscious use of language, lest we continue to be deluded by that which operates behind our back.

We may use Carroll's example of semantical analysis to outline in general terms the sociological study of prejudices. As sociologists we would want to interview people and ask them to define, in their own terms, the meanings which they implicitly associate with certain words, such as "primitive," "underdeveloped," "poverty," etc. We would then analyze the content of the answers and study the extent to which certain types of answers associate with various demographic or biographical variables. We would want to study prejudices for we have established theoretically that prejudices constitute the social fabrication of reality. As Gadamer states, "reality happens precisely within language." It is therefore our intention to study social reality in part through a study of the constitutive role of preconscious linguistical concepts, or prejudices.

The Sociological Study of Hermeneutical Reflection

The approach to the study of prejudices which we have outlined may be elaborated into an experimental research design, a design which would enable us to study the effects of deliberate hermeneutical reflection on the mediation and ovecoming of false prejudices.[42] After interviewing those selected (pre-test) and recording their prejudices (implicitly held meanings associated with certain words), we would adminster an experimental stimulus, such as a small group dialogue focusing on the implicitly held meanings revealed during the initial interview. The dialogue would be facilitated by the researcher who would encourage hermeneutical reflection by bringing into critical discourse the specific prejudices initially provided by the group's members. Following the discourse the participants would once again be interviewed and asked to expound upon their implicitly held meanings (post-test). We could then note any differences between the pre-test and post-test and draw conclusions from these differences in terms of other information obtained during the experiment. It is reasonable to think that such a research design would yield important insights into the relationship between hermeneutical reflection and prejudices.

Several questions arise with regard to the proposed

---

[42] Hermeneutical reflection is defined in the final section of chapter four, pp. 133-136.

design. One question would pertain to the difference between random and deliberate hermeneutical reflection. Would the group discourse described above constitute an experience of random or deliberate hermeneutical reflection? Clearly the intent of the researcher is to deliberately facilitate hermeneutical reflection among the group's participants. But are the participants themselves deliberately reflecting hermeneutically? We must further specify our distinction between random and deliberate hermeneutical reflection before we can answer this question. We may say that deliberate hermeneutical reflection occurs only when an individual consciously acknowledges the prejudiced nature of interpretation, and seeks to be guided by this general understanding in particular moments of interpretation. This is what Gadamer and Carroll do in the work which we have discussed. We may say, then, that we must further specify the experiment which we have proposed to account for this distinction. We may posit a more involved experimental design which aims to specifically study deliberate hermeneutical reflection. This could take the form of inviting one (control) group of participants to participate in a group discussion which is not led in any specific direction by the facilitator but nevertheless focuses on the general topics from which certain words had been previously identified and their related prejudices noted. As part of the same experiment another

(experimental) group would be interviewed but would be informed that the intention of the discourse is to study its effect on the mediation and overcoming of prejudices. These participants would thus be informed about Gadamer's notion of the prejudiced nature of interpretation and encouraged to deliberately reflect hermeneutically.

This research design is admittedly general and exploratory. As such it ignores the numerous threats to validity associated with an experimental design. Nevertheless it may be taken as an important first step toward the sociological study of hermeneutical reflection and its relationship to prejudices. Aside from its generality, however, an important question arises with regard to its experimental nature. Does not the idea of studying hermeneutical reflection by way of a research design modeled after that of a classical scientific experiment contradict Gadamer's position regarding method? This is an important question, for it would be unfortunate if we were to find ourselves in the hapless position of contradicting ourselves by rejecting one part of Gadamer's work in order to study another. The answer to the question, however, is that there is nothing contradictory about what we have proposed. In fact, a Gadamerian would say that the question which we have posed is ill-conceived. What we have actually suggested does not so much follow the model of a classical scientific experiment as the structure of human

experience itself. According to Gadamer, when an individual experiences an unsettling feeling regarding the meaning of something the inclination is to reflect on its meaning hermeneutically. Such is the nature of the experience of hermeneutical reflection. Its aim is to express consciously through interpretation that which has been uncomfortably experienced in understanding. Such expression has the structure of a question. The question, once expressed, gives rise to a meaningful discourse the experience of which may negate or confirm one's prejudgment regarding the meaning of that which is under consideration. The negation or confirmation resulting from one's discursive experience is part of the nature of experience itself.

The structure of an experiment is therefore essentially no different from the structure of experience itself. The initial "unsettling" feeling, the "annoyance" factor, if you will, which gives rise to hermeneutical reflection, is analogous to the research question which serves as the impetus for a scientific experiment; the question expressed through interpretation is analogous to the scientist's hypothesis; the resulting meaningful discourse is analogous to the experimental stimulus; and the conclusion, the experience of the meaning of the discourse, is analogous to the comparison between the post-test and the pre-test. The importance of this comparison is not that the structure of common experience is comparable to that of a scientific

experiment, for the meaning of this proposition may be construed in such a way as to suggest that common experience is almost as "good" or valid as that of a scientific experiment. The importance of our comparison is that it illustrates the fact that a scientific experiment has the same structure as experience itself. Doing an experiment involves doing what experience always does, albeit in a theoretically contrived situation. What Gadamer rejects about method, experimental or otherwise, is 1) method's claim to a privileged route to truth, and 2) the methodological requirement of attempting to detach oneself from one's linguistical tradition, an attempt which can never be fully successful. Given that many social scientists would admit that their methods do not constitute a privileged access to truth, it is Gadamer's second criticism which is more important. In Gadamer's view, method, in so far as it requires a deliberate attempt to carve out for oneself an objective interpretive perspective, is a form of self-inflicted alienation. Such an attempt denies the fact that all interpretation is historical, and mistakenly claims that there can be an interpretive moment outside of our historical tradition. In Gadamer's view, such attempts at a controlled alienation can only distort the interpretation of reality.

It follows from our reiteration of Gadamer's critique of method that the experiment proposed in this study is not

subject to a Gadamerian critique and is therefore not contradictory. The "experiment" which we have proposed neither makes a false claim to truth in the name of scienticism; nor does it posit a false separation between the researcher's historicity and the interpretive experience of the experiment. Our design is simply committed to the notion that the nature of interpretation is prejudiced, and that perhaps the best way to study the mediation of prejudices is by studying hermeneutical reflection. What we have proposed is actually little different than a Socratic dialogue. It intends only to 1) pose a question (for example, how would you define the meaning of primitive?), and 2) facilitate a discourse whereby people will be able consciously to experience the prejudice in their understanding by expounding on the definitions they have already provided, either deliberately or randomly. The only important difference between this approach and a quotidian dialogue is that the former is deliberately intended and that which will be observed will be noted in order to examine it later in reference to Gadamer's hermeneutics and the relevant soiological literature.[43]

---

[43] Interestingly, if we wanted we could alter the terminology used above and describe our intended "experiment" in terms of a Socratic dialogue. This however, would taint the credibility of our proposal in the eyes of sociologists who lack the interpretive benefit of Gadamer's hermeneutics. It would make sense politically, therefore, to play the language game of the sociologist and discuss our project in experimental terms in order not to alienate those outside of this literature.

Given the all pervasive importance of prejudices for the constitution of experience and the social fabrication of reality it is not difficult to conclude that hermeneutical reflection serves a very important social function. If we were incapable of hermeneutical reflection we would truly be determined by history, for we would have no critical experience of it, no chance to mediate its meaning in light of our own experience. The ability to reflect hermeneutically on the meanings we inherit enables us to mediate these meanings and make them our own. Hermeneutical reflection is therefore both an example and expression of interpretive power, part of our natural ability to express ourselves and question what passes for reality.

Hermeneutical reflection appears even more important when we consider that reality is largely constituted through habit. As we have seen, both Schutz and Mead agree that our lives and interpretive experiences are routinized or habitualized. Habitual or taken-for-granted interpretation is the antithesis of hermeneutical reflection. Hermeneutical reflection may therefore be discussed in terms of the "breaching" experiments conducted by Harold Garfinkel and his students. During a breaching experiment, the researchers (typically participant-observers) purposely violate the normative expectations of the person(s) with whom they are interacting and observe the efforts of the other(s) to attempt to reinstate normalcy to the situation.

Because in such situations the normal flow of reality has become disrupted or "breached," ethnomethodologists describe these intentional disruptions as breaching experiments. These experiments have demonstrated over and over again what is now known as the conventional construction of reality. For example, in one case Garfinkel assigns his students to spend brief periods of time at home acting like boarders, speaking only when spoken to, and the like. In his description of the students' findings, Garfinkel writes

> ... family members were stupified. They vigorously sought to make the strange actions intelligible and to restore the situation to normal appearances.[44]

This is one among many studies which demonstrate the fact that when reality is constructed in terms of conventional meanings and expectations, and when this quasi-automatic process is disrupted, the typical response is to act in such a way as to recover conventionality.

The notion that reality is constructed conventionally suggests that we have an aversion to questioning, an aversion to hermeneutical reflection. Summarizing this central insight of ethnomethodology Randall Collins writes, "our strongest social principle is to leave the interpretations alone, lest we see how flimsy they are and reveal the unfoundedness beneath."[45] From Gadamer's view,

---

[44] Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 47.

[45] Randall Collins, Three Sociological Traditions, 1985, p. 210.

it is not so much that interpretations rest on shaky ground, but that they rest on prejudices.[46] What is unsettling about questioning our prejudices is not that we would be faced with the "flimsiness" of reality so much as we would be faced with ourselves, and the way we actually are, as contrasted with the way we typically think of ourselves and our condition.

Few would disagree that the insight that reality is constructed conventionally is the single most important contribution of ethnomethology and phenomenological sociology. However, whereas ethnomethodology studies how people respond when the habitual or conventional flow of mundane reality is breached, Gadamer's work implies the importance of studying the conditions under which people themselves are inclined to, or denied the opportunity to, question the prejudiced construction or fabrication of reality. The study of hermeneutical reflection is thus the flip-side, if you will, of ethnomethodology. Where ethnomethodology studies the conventional construction and reparation of social reality, sociological hermeneutics studies the experience of hermeneutical reflection; it studies the experience of questioning the conventional and prejudiced fabrication of reality and the extent to which

---

[46] Indeed, Gadamer would argue that interpretations are not "grounded" at all but are instead manifestations of understanding in particular situations and are, in this sense, constituted by concrete social relations.

the possibilities for such questioning are differentiated across social statuses and social settings. The sociological study of interpretation from a Gadamerian perspective thus does not study that which is taken-for-granted, but the phenomenon of not taking reality for granted, for this is the nature of hermeneutical reflection.

Why should sociologists study hermeneutical reflection? We should study hermeneutical reflection because in both of its variations (random and deliberate) it represents an experience which mediates social structure by questioning the prejudiced fabrication of reality. Hermeneutical reflection is thus the human factor in a historical equation which otherwise would amount to a predetermined, meaningless existence. The degree of importance associated with studying hermeneutical reflection turns on the extent to which the conventional fabrication of reality may be found to be constituted through false prejudices. While it may not be feasible to attempt to establish the frequency of false prejudices across a society or social group it appears safe to say that the discovery of even a small number of widely assumed false prejudices would be indicative of the social significance of hermeneutical reflection, and of the sociological significance of its study. To the extent that hermeneutical reflection deliberately aims to bring into discourse the prejudices constitutive of experience its study becomes one with the study of social structure and the

fabrication of social reality. By studying deliberate hermeneutical reflection we can learn about its ability to reveal false prejudices and overcome false consciousness.

The sociological study of hermeneutical reflection should focus on two general questions.

1) What is the effect of random and deliberate hermeneutical reflection on the mediation of social structure, defined in terms of prejudices; and what kind of effect does it have on the mediation and overcoming of false prejudices?

2) What is the social distribution of random and deliberate hermeneutical reflection and to what extent are the opportunities to experience hermeneutical reflection stratified across social groups and social settings?[47]

It would be worthwhile to observe dialogues within the rooms where policy decisions are being made, for it would be important to examine the extent to which hermeneutical reflection is either encouraged, tolerated, or precluded in such situations. It would also be important to study hermeneutical reflection across various institutions, such as educational institutions and centers of social research. In terms of the relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics at the education-policy level, the experience of hermeneutical reflection may be encouraged and employed to help students identify and face consciously the prejudices which often block their understanding of certain ideas. In this sense

---

[47] These minimal criteria are 1) the experience of an unsettling interpretive experience and 2) its expression in the form of a linguistic assertion which has the structure of a question.

hermeneutical reflection may be used as a teaching tool, as an educational vehicle. This is perhaps the clearest example of the practical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics, for Gadamer's work may be used to teach hermeneutical reflection by example. In a very different sense, we may want to study the extent to which education hinders hermeneutical reflection by discouraging the questioning of prejudices. This is education at its worst and it would be interesting to study classroom settings in order to ascertain precisely how bad things really are in this respect.

The importance of studying hermeneutical reflection may be further demonstrated in terms of the fracturing or denial of hermeneutical reflection across social groups and settings. Our definition of hermeneutical reflection, be it random or deliberate, has two main features. The first is the <u>experience</u> of the need to question, to seek understanding because one is not satisfied with the meaning already experienced. The second important feature is the <u>questioning</u> to which the initial experience gives rise. In spite of our definition's lack of specificity we can at least say that these are the minimal criteria for hermeneutical reflection. If the first criterion for hermeneutical reflection is present (an unsettling interpretive experience) but the individual is denied the opportunity to express this unsettling experience in the

form of question (the second criterion), then the experience of hermeneutical reflection has been fractured or violated. The denial of one's desire to raise a question in light of an unsettling interpretive experience constitutes an act of interpretive violence because the denial amounts to a preclusion of the realization of one's interpretive power.[48] When we consider the barriers to questioning imposed by differences of social status and social situation it would appear that the opportunities to reflect hermeneutically would be highly stratified in our society. In other words, the opportunities to express through speech questions regarding the meaning of something (a contract, an order, the meaning of another question), are not unlike economic opportunities, highly stratified, and vary considerably across groups and social settings. This suggests that the study of hermeneutical reflection crosses over into the study of interpretive power and violence. As Giddens writes,

> the reflexive elaboration of frames of meaning is characteristically imbalanced in relation to the possession of power, whether this be a result of the superior linguistic or dialectical skills of one

---

[48] Indeed, if we were to do an empirical study of the stratification of hermeneutical reflection we would expect to find a high (negative) correlation between economic status and interpretive violence. That is, the higher one's economic status the less likely would be the case that one would be a victim of interpretive domination. It would also follow that members of the economic elite, owing to their power regarding defining situations and specifying the appropriateness of certain behaviors, would be most likely to be the dominators rather than the domianted.

> person in conversation with another; the possession of relevant types of 'technical knowledge'; the mobilization of authority or 'force', etc. 'What passes for social reality' stands in immediate relation to the distribution of power.[49]

The analysis of the stratification of hermeneutical reflection thus opens up a new dimension in the study of power and social stratification.[50]

---

[49] Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method, 1976, p. 113.

[50] Similarly, viewing the preclusion of one's full realization of his/her interpretive experience as simply the result of the power of one over another ignores the fact that the person with the greater amount of power could also have encouraged rather than discouraged or precluded the other's realization of his/her interpretive power.

Conclusion

We have discussed the practical implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics in terms of the topics and research questions which it places before us. It is the view of this work that herein lies the central significance of Gadamer's efforts for sociology, for it is our position that the sociological significance of hermeneutics turns on the social significance of hermeneutical or interpretive experience. It is believed that through the study of the topics and questions which we have raised sociologists will be able more deeply to understand interpretive experience and its relationship to social action and the structuring of social relations.

Admittedly, our emphasis on the topical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics, our preoccupation with the significance of the research topics and questions to which his work gives rise, has resulted in an under-emphasis on the specifically methodological importance of his work. This does not mean that we view the methodological implications of Gadamer's work to be unimportant. On the contrary, Gadamer's hermeneutics has important implications for methodological issues both within and outside of the sociology, as evidenced by the fact that the most comprehensive discussion of his work to date within sociology has focused almost exclusively on its methodological significance. It is simply the bias of this

work that the methodological implications of Gadamer's hermeneutics, at least within sociology, are of secondary importance as compared with the topical implications which we have identified. It is indeed true that the methodological and topical significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics may both be traced back to the primary insight regarding the linguistically prejudiced nature of interpretation. However, given the fact that the effect of the interpretive action of sociologists on the social fabrication of reality is minimal compared with that of society at large, it appears ill-conceived for sociologists to place their main emphasis on interpretive problems and methodological disputes within sociology. More important, we believe, is the study of the nature of interpretation in terms of the relationship between hermeneutical reflection and prejudices.

But the contention nevertheless arises that, without having first examed the methodological significance of Gadamer's work, how is a Gadamerian-influenced sociologist to proceed methodologically while studying the questions introduced by his work? We have already discussed the fact that Gadamer views method as a conceptual and methodological derivative of quotidian understanding. The problem is that the derivation of method typically involves adherence to interpretive criteria that confound one's natural experience of truth in situations. Rather than to experience the truth

in a situation as one commonly does, one is expected to suppress biographical biases in favor of an "objective" interpretation. Gadamer's main criticism of method is thus that it is itself an alienating experience, and as such, can only lead to the distortion of truth, since, after all, it is our understanding, our way of being in the world and our relation to it, which is the judge of truth. The alienation of experience arises when one claims on the basis of methodological adherence and conformity that he/she has attained an objective interpretive position. Such a claim, which is essentially Cartesian, assumes that it is possible to suspend the biases and prejudices resulting from one's historicity, thereby attaining a less clouded, objective perspective. It should be clear that from a Gadamerian perspective, this is a hopeless task. Such a claim assumes a false breaking of tradition, the notion that there exists outside of the tradition an objective interpretive moment. Certainly we may be able to overcome some prejudices, through hermeneutical reflection, but this can never be more than a partial overcoming, for prejudices are the condition of interpretive experience. Objectivity is thus a myth. The same may be said of subjectivity, for "subjective" views are never merely subjective, if we take the term to mean that subjective views are individually constituted. Reality and our experience of it is inescapably intersubjective or social.

Gadamer's critique of method may be construed to mean that he rejects science. But this is not the case. To Gadamer, science is a discipline of questioning and research, a discipline which does not necessarily require adherence to the fallacy of absolute historical transcendence. In the concluding paragraph of Truth and Method Gadamer writes

> the fact that in the knowing involved in them (the human sciences) the knower's own being is involved marks, certainly, the limitation of 'method,' but not that of science. Rather, what the tool of method does not achieve must- and effectively can- be achieved by a discipline of questioning and research, a discipline that guarantees truth.[51]

Gadamer thus endorses a science unencumbered by the false claim of objectivity. Such a science, a discipline of questioning and research, may be said to guarantee truth in that it remains ever open to the experience of truth by escaping the delusion of objectivity through the acknowledgment of the prejudiced nature of interpretation. By acknowledging the fact that interpretation is constituted in understanding, we remain open to experience - our questioning, our experiments, and our observations -, in a way that is free of the false prejudice of objectivity. The truth such a discipline "guarantees" is therefore not at all an absolute truth, but a consciousness aware of the constitutive effect of history within it. Such an effective-historical consciousness is thus open to

---

[51] Gadamer, Truth and Method, 1986, p. 447.

experience the truth in a way those ignorant of history's constitutive effect cannot. From a Gadamerian standpoint, the only methodological concessions requested of sociology are 1) the admission of the prejudiced nature of interpretation, an admission which many sociologists have already expressed; and 2) the admission that the constitutive significance of prejudices is not something to be loathed. Rather than view the prejudiced nature of interpretation as something vicious, we should instead explore its significance scientifically and relate our findings to our historical situation.

We began this study by acknowledging the fact that sociology has, for many years, been living off of the intellectual capital of the nineteenth century. This fact has proved unfortunate for sociology, however, for it has hindered its ability to keep pace with the ever-expanding complexities of modern life. Classical concepts have been revised, but their fit remains loose; their relevance, questionable. Much sociological research today is little more than an exercise in technological application. The social significance and relevance of such studies are generally minimal. We have tried in this study to open up a new dimension in sociology, a dimension capable of helping us understand the nature of our historical predicament. Our conclusion is a call for the sociological analysis of the nature of prejudices and the experience Gadamer has defined

as hermeneutical reflection. Studying these topics will provide insight into the nature of our condition; a condition structured by true and false prejudices which generally escape us. The success or failure of this opening will now depend on our ability to study the topics and questions we have identified. Perhaps in this way we may be able to carry on Gadamer's hope of cultivating an effective-historical consciousness, and thus illuminate what might otherwise be a dark and alienated future.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Abel, Theodor. "Verstehen I and Verstehen II." Theory and Decision, Vol. 6, 1975, pp. 199-202.

Alexander, Jeffrey. Theoretical Logic in Sociology. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Arendt, Hannah. On Violence. New York: Harcourt, 1970.

Bauman, Zygmunt. Hermeneutics and Social Science. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

Bendix, Reinhard. Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas. The Social Construction of Reality. Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1967.

Bernstein, Richard. Beyond Objectivism and Relativism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

Birus, Hendrik. "Hermeneutics today: Some skeptical remarks." New German Critique, Vol. 42, 1981.

Blau, Peter M., ed. Approaches to the Study of Social Structure. London: Free Press, 1975.

Bleicher, Josef. Contemporary Hermeneutics. London: Routledge, 1980.

Blumer, Herbert. Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969.

Bottomore, Tom and Nisbet, Robert, eds. A History of Sociological Analysis. New York: Basic, 1978.

Brockelman, Paul T. Time and Self. New York: Crossroad, 1985.

_____ . Existential Phenomenology and the World of Ordinary Experience. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980.

Buckley, Walter. Sociology and Modern Systems Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967.

Burger, Thomas. Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation: History, Laws, and Ideal Types. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1976.

Buttel, Fred H. "Environmental sociology: A new paradigm?" American Sociologist, Vol. 13, 1979, pp. 237-256.

Carroll, John E. "Ecology and moral choice: Bias, prejudice and ecology." Unpublished paper, Department of Forest Resources, University of New Hampshire, 1988.

Catton, W. R., Jr. and Dunlap, R. E. "Environmental sociology: A new paradigm." American Sociologist, Vol. 13, 1978, pp. 41-49.

_____ . "A new ecological paradigm for post-exuberant sociology." American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 24 No.1, 1980 pp. 15-47.

Cicourel, Aaron. Cognitive Sociology. London: MacMillan, 1973.

Cohen, Jere, Hazelrigg, Lawrence E. and Pope, Whitney. "De-Parsonizing Weber: A critique of Parsons' interpretation of Weber's sociology." American Sociological Review, Vol. 40, 1975, pp. 229-241.

Collins, Randall. Three Sociological Traditions. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Dallmayr, Fred R. and McCarthy, Thomas A. Understanding and Social Inquiry. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

Dreyfus, Hubert and Rabinow, Paul. Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Dunlap, R. E. and Catton, W. R., Jr. "Environmental sociology." Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 5, 1979, pp. 243-273.

Dunlap, R. E. and Van Liere, K. D. "Environmental concern: A bibliography of environmental studies and brief appraisal of the literature." In Public Administration Series Bibliography 44. Monticello, Illinois: Vance Bibliographies, 1978.

Durkheim, Emile. The Rules of Sociological Method. Translated by Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950.

Fisher, Berenice M. and Strauss, Anselm L. "Interactionism." In Bottomore and Nisbet, eds. A History of Sociological Analysis. New York: Basic, 1978, pp. 457-498.

Foucault, Michel. The Foucault Reader. Paul Rabinow, ed. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Freudenberg, N. Not In Our Backyards. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984.

Freund, Julian. The Sociology of Max Weber. Translated by M. Ilford. New York: Vintage, 1969.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Truth and Method. New York: Crossroad, 1986. Translated and edited by Garrett Barden and John Cumming.

_____ . Philosophical Apprenticeships. Translated by R. Sullivan. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985.

_____ . Philosophical Hermeneutics. Translated by David E. Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

_____ . "Hermeneutics and social science." Cultural Hermeneutics, Vol. 2, 1975, pp. 307-316.

Garfinkel, Harold. Studies in Ethnomethodology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Giddens, Anthony. "Sociology: Issues and problems." In Exploring Society. Edited by A. R. Sadovnik, C. H. Persell, E. A. Baumann and R. G. Mitchell Jr. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.

_____ . The Constitution of Society. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

_____ . Central Problems in Social Theory. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

_____ . Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

_____ . New Rules of Sociological Method. New York: Basic, 1976.

Goodman, Mark J. "Type methodology and type myth: Some antecedents of Max Weber's approach." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45 No. 1, 1975, pp. 45-58.

Graber, Edith. "Interpretive sociology is not part of psychology." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45 No.4, 1975, pp. 67-70.

Habermas, Jürgen. The Theory of Communicative Action, volumes 1 and 2, translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (vol. 1) and 1987 (vol. 2).

_____ . "The hermeneutic claim to universality." In Contemporary Hermeneutics. Josef Bleicher, ed. London: Routledge, 1980.

_____ . "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method." In Understanding and Social Inquiry. Dallmayr and McCarthy, eds. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977, pp. 335-363.

_____ . "Hannah Arendt's communications concept of power." Social Research, Vol. 44 No. 1, 1977, pp. 3-24.

_____. Knowledge and Human Interests. Translated by Jeremy Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.

_____ . "On systematically distorted communication." Inquiry, Vol. 13 No. 3, 1970, pp. 205-218.

Hamilton, Lawrence C. "Concern about toxic wastes: Three demographic predictors." Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 24 No. 4, 1985, pp. 463-486.

_____ . Public Response to the Discovery of Water Contamination. Durham, New Hampshire: Water Resource Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 1985.

_____ . Household Conservation During Water Emergencies: Two Case Studies. Durham, New Hampshire: Water Resource Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 1984.

Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.

Hekman, Susan J. Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge. South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986.

Held, David. Introduction to Critical Theory. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

Henderson, A. M. and Parsons, Talcott. Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947.

Howard, Roy J. Three Faces of Hermeneutics. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Hoy, David Couzens. The Critical Circle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Hughes, H. Stuart. Consciousness and Society. New York: Knopf, 1958.

Joas, Hans. G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of his Thought. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985.

John, Robert. "Max Weber's epistemology of the cultural sciences: Presupposition of 'interpretive sociology'." The Social Science Journal, Vol. 21 No. 3, 1984, pp. 91-109.

Kortian, Garbis. Metacritique. Translated by John Raffan. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Kuhn, Manford. "Major trends in symbolic interaction in the past twenty-five years." Sociological Quarterly, Vol. 5, (Winter) 1964, pp. 61-84.

Kuhn, Thomas. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Leat, Diana. "Misunderstanding Verstehen." Sociological Review, Vol. 20, 1972, pp. 29-40.

Levine, Adelaide G. Love Canal: Science, Politics and People. Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1982.

Lodge, M. Magnitude Scaling: Quantitative Measurement of Opinions. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981.

Martindale, Don. The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.
_____ . The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

McCarthy, Thomas, A. The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985.
_____ . "On misunderstanding 'understanding'." Theory and Decision, Vol. 3, 1973, pp. 351-370.

McGowan, Thomas G. and Hamilton, Lawrence C. "Reflectivity and toxic wastes: An empirical, Meadian analysis." Unpublished paper presented to the Environmental Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association during its annual meeting on August 30, 1986, in New York.

Mead, George Herbert. Mind, Self and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.
_____ . The Philosophy of the Act. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938.

Mehta, J. Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976.

Mendelson, Jack. "The Habermas-Gadamer debate." New German Critique, Vol. 18, 1979, pp. 44-73.

Miller, David. George Herbert Mead: Self, Language and the World. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1973.

Misgeld, Dieter. "Critical theory and hermeneutics: The debate between Habermas and Gadamer." In On Critical Theory. John O'Neill ed. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.

Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt, ed. The Hermeneutics Reader. New York: Continuum, 1988.

Munch, Peter A. "'Sense' and 'intention' in Max Weber's theory of social action." Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 45 No. 4, 1975, pp. 59-66.

Oliver, Ivan. "The 'old' and the 'new' hermeneutic in sociological theory." The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 34, 1983, pp. 519-553.

Parkin, Frank. Max Weber. London: Tavistock, 1982.

Parsons, Talcott. "Comments: Reply to Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope." American Sociological Review, Vol. 41, 1976, pp. 361-365.

_____ . The Structure of Social Action. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1949.

Perinbanayagam, Robert S. Signifying Acts. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

Reck, Andrew J., ed. Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.

Ritzer, George. Sociological Theory. New York: Knopf, 1983.

Sale, Kirkpatrick. "The forest for the trees: Can today's environmentalists tell the difference?" Mother Jones, November, 1986, pp. 25-58.

Schnaiberg, Allen. The Environment. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Schumacher, E. F. Small Is Beautiful. New York: Harper Row, 1973.

Schutz, Alfred. The Phenomenology of the Social World. Translated by George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1967.

Stokols, D. "Environmental psychology." Annual Review of Psychology, Vol. 29, 1978, pp. 253-295.

Thompson, John P. "Introduction," to his translation of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1981.

Turner, J. The Structure of Sociological Theory. Chicago: Dorsey, 1986.

Turner, J. and Beeghley, L. The Emergence of Sociological Theory. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1981.

Van Liere, K. D. and Dunlap, R. E. "The social bases of environmental concern: A review of hypotheses, explanations and empirical evidence." Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 44, 1980, pp. 181-197.

_____ . "Environmental concern: Does it make a difference how it's measured?" Environment and Behavior, Vol. 13 No. 6, 1981, pp. 651-676.

Wachterhauser, Brice R., ed. Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986.

Weber, Max. "Some categories of interpretive sociology." Translated and edited by Edith Graber. Sociological Quarterly, Vol. 22, 1981, pp. 151-180.

_____ . Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics. Translated and edited by G. Oakes. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1975.

_____ . Economy and Society. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. New York: Bedminster, 1968.

_____ . From Max Weber. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. New York: Oxford Universiy Press, 1958.

Weinsheimer, Joel. Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Wright, Kathleen. "Gadamer: The speculative structure of language." In Wachterhauser, Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, 1986.

Zeitlin, Irving. Rethinking Sociology: A Critique of Contemporary Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973.